Unit 304

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Unit 304

by wanderlust96

Summary

“You’re a mechanic?” The man asked, eyes dancing briefly to Will’s oil-stained hands. “Perhaps I could ask for a business card. My engine has been a tad temperamental of late.”

Will's only bit of peace is the time spent alone in his storage unit-turned-workshop....until Hannibal rents a unit on the same row.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

Chapter 1

The quarter was a mess of overlapping street music and neon vibrance. Will had fought off the stirrings of a migraine at the station, with the help of aspirin and cheap coffee, but now it was hitting him in full force – pounding behind his eyes in time with the heavy bass spilling from the clubs flanking the thoroughfare. He slammed his foot on the break, wincing at the harsh jolt that shot through his neck, as throngs of people milled about the road as though the sidewalk didn't exist; harrowed commuters, starving artists and revelling tourists alike. With gritted teeth, he afforded himself a brief moment of catharsis, in which he imagined ploughing through the crowd and leaving a stroke of red in his wake.

The day had started badly, as most of his days tended to, lurching from a nightmare to the urgent buzz of his alarm and the muffled dispute of the couple in the next apartment. He reached too hastily for his phone and knocked it to the floor instead, where it continued to drone as Will dropped his head back to his pillow and considered the damp patch on his ceiling. He had taken to affording himself five minutes in the morning to wallow, but now his wallowing was being disturbed by his mobile as well as what he could only assume was the lid of a saucepan clattering against the wall. When he did manage to force himself out of bed, the cheap polyblend of his uniform made him shudder and he had to adjust the collar of his shirt three times before he could bare to move on with his morning. He ate his cereal to the sound of the muffled wailing of a baby across the courtyard.

A tedious shift followed; hours of booking disruptive day-drinkers and filing complaints. There was very little satisfaction to be had in a job where each day was the same and his colleagues, with whom he had nothing in common, enjoyed pointing out his socially awkward tendencies and referred to him as *grim Graham*.

"Cheer up, Grim," Bates, the fresh-faced deputy, had said the second Will walked through the door.

Will had deflated; even the new guy felt confident enough to poke fun. He wondered if Bates knew that the grimace he had contorted his lips into was actually his best impression of a smile. It left him numb, at least emotionally. He would have killed for his apathy to manifest as *physical* detachment so that he could have a break from the feeling of his brain writhing around his skull like a squid in a jar. There was no chance of that happening back at his noisy, shoebox apartment though and so, like he did most evenings, Will left work and headed straight to the middle of nowhere.

As he finally escaped the nocturnal chaos of New Orleans in the midst of Mardi Gras, and nosed his volvo into the quieter residential streets that would eventually open out onto the highway, his fingertips ceased their tapping on the steering wheel and he felt his shoulders unfurl.

The concealed cabin on the bayou where Will had spent the final years of his youth, with its rusted tin roof and creaking porch, was more to his tastes than his current dwellings. His father had settled them there, half-balanced above the bog on rickety stilts and nestled among thick trees with weeping branches, when social services made it abundantly clear that his vagabond lifestyle could only be having a negative impact on his teenage son. Will hadn't thought to venture far to join the police academy, finally able to be stuck in his ways – clinging to the familiarity he had been gifted just a little bit too late into his emotional development. Even so, the commute from the Bayou to the City wasn't one that could be tackled twice on a daily basis, and so he had been forced to rent something closer to the station. He was orphaned shortly after, if that term could really be applied to a man of twenty-two years,and had soon realised that familiarity wasn't half as comforting when the memories evoked were of a dead man. Suddenly, he was shackled to a place he couldn't stand; no longer young enough to be of concern to the people who had advocated for a permanent homestead and certainly not old enough to know where to begin in finding himself a new one. Despite what coming-of-age movies had led him to believe, it was not a simple case of venturing to a new and exciting part of the country, landing an honest job and stumbling onto the property ladder. Rusted shacks with a tendency to flood didn't go for much and so while Will had a nest egg, it was closer to that of a hummingbird's than the emu-sized monstrosity he would need to start anew.

Herein lay the need for the middle of nowhere. Will's hobbies required space, of which his apartment had none, and quiet, of which the entire city in which he resided was equally without. Even if he had managed to stack towers of boat motors along his walls and block the noise of his neighbours long enough to tie a lure or two, there was still the fact that Will Graham did not enjoy *people*. He understood them, but relationships required one to be understood in return and in twenty-two years Will had not found a single person who could make sense of him. People had tried, often with a reductionistic approach. He'd been labelled 'psycho' by his peers, 'autistic' by his teachers, 'poorly mannered and recalcitrant' by the principle of his school and 'emotionally stunted' by his case worker. Will supposed he was some amalgamation of the four, if one squinted and looked at him sideways. If there were a personality scattergram on which everyone had a spot, he'd be the little dot on its own in one corner, often mistaken for a spec of dust.

So Will found his solace in an unlikely space; a sprawling industrial zone roughly ten miles west along route 61.

Syd's Storage consisted of thirty rows of yellowing garage-style units, accessible via an enormous grid of gravel roads. On Will's first visit to the reception, which looked an awful lot like a temporary building pushing it's luck, Will had noted that the racks of copper keys for rows one through six were empty, with only several keys missing from the ten rows after that. He promptly asked for access to a unit on row thirty, a full five-minute drive from the entrance. A year later, he had yet to see another soul anywhere near what he had come to think of as *his* row and, other than the distant hum of the highway, everything was blissfully quiet.

Unit 302 – because odd numbers made him uncomfortable – was an emblem of escape for Will and, as he juddered to a stop outside of it for perhaps the hundredth time, he sighed heavily enough that one might think all of life's problems resided in his lungs. He'd recently

oiled the hinges of the roller door, and it ascended smoothly with just the quiet clunk of the mechanism within. The ceiling light, suspended by its own wire, clicked to life immediately, illuminating his tidy respite – a clean concrete floor, a steel shelving unit housing his tools, and a neat workbench and folding chair at the centre. With the cool evening air sneaking in through the open front, Will allowed himself to get lost in the intricacies of a vintage boat motor.

It must have been 9pm when the sound of tires and spitting gravel made his chest seize. He dropped the rotary cog he'd been attempting to fit and glared out into the intrusion of someone's high beams. When the car stopped and the headlights flicked off, Will was left squinting, half-blind, into the night.

"Hello?" He called; voice rough from disuse.

For a long moment, nothing happened. The car was a sleek, black thing and the interior lights remained off so that the driver was an indecipherable silhouette – an unsettlingly *still* silhouette which seemed content to stare motionlessly from the window with its head tilted just so.

"*Hello*?" Will tried again, equal parts spooked and frustrated. He reached for the spanner on his workbench and the car door swung open.

"Sorry to have startled you," the silhouette said, stepping from the vehicle and into the light spilling out of the storage unit. The voice had a deep, unique cadence – a guttural, but not unpleasant, accent.

The face it belonged to was equally unique; sharp and ungiving – more reminiscent of a Victorian death mask than the soft human flesh on which one would be cast.

Will blinked a couple of times before bending down to retrieve the cog. The man still seemed to be awaiting a response when he righted himself and so Will did his best to mask his irritation when he replied.

"Didn't startle me. Just didn't expect anyone to be here."

"Hmm, so late," the man agreed, still content to stand at the threshold of Will's personal space.

"At all," Will corrected, rather bluntly, "There are plenty of units up front, it's less of a drive."

He watched as the man's lips tightened and silently cursed his fortitude. A lesser man would have snapped back at him, allowing Will to lead them into a gruff to and fro which would ultimately lead to the other finding another unit, far *far* away.

"You're a mechanic?" The man asked, eyes dancing briefly to Will's oil-stained hands. "Perhaps I could ask for a business card. My engine has been a tad temperamental of late."

Will considered the man's car. It had practically purred its way onto the lot.

“I’m not a mechanic.”

“Shame,” the man replied, and stepped back into the shadows to lock his car.

Will returned to his motor as the other stalked a little way down the row and let himself into unit 304. This was a remarkably unpleasant turn of events. He could feel his headache returning already. It took three attempts to fit the cog, and by the time he had, the stranger was back in his car. Holding his breath, Will did his best to move his hands as if he were still busy with the hunk of metal in front of him while glaring out of his periphery. He expected the man to peel away, hopefully affronted, but he merely shifted into first and ambled slowly to his own unit. Hoping to catch a glimpse of what the man had come to store – with any luck it would be something seasonal and he wouldn’t have his space invaded again until next Christmas – Will peered round the edge of his little workshop. The car, a Bentley of all things, was reversing into the unit. In several seconds it was fully tucked away and Will heard several purposeful steps before the unit door hurtled down to the ground. He scowled at the disrupted gravel left behind.

It was a cold night, but not bitingly. Will had thrown a tan body warmer over his jumper and was comfortable enough. Stuffing an entire car into a unit, just to avoid the exposure of walking ten feet to and from the trunk was more than a little extreme; especially since the man in question had been dressed to the nines in a tailored coat and a truly ugly black ushanka. Perhaps he was Russian. It would explain the accent and the sculpted, Slavic features, though not the apparent aversion to the cold. Perhaps, the law enforcer inside him urged, he was doing something untoward and Will should go in guns blazing and ban him from ever returning to Syd’s Storage again. He huffed, scratched the back of his neck, and got back to work.

There were five blissfully quite minutes or so, where Will began to believe it might not be so terrible to have a neighbour. With both the car and its occupant out of sight, and only the familiar hum of distant traffic, things were no different than before. Then, just as Will reached to spin the newly-fitted propeller with a satisfied hum, a grating, metallic sound reared up two units down. It sounded like the electric file Will’s father had used during a short stint as a carpenter, but infinitely more annoying for that fact that it wasn’t his father, but the very unwelcome stranger. It groaned on for ten seconds then stopped and Will shuffled out into the open to glare at the closed unit. Another ten seconds or so of noise, and then silence. Will felt his hackles rise. Even with the barrier of 303 between them, the sound was loud enough to rattle around his skull. Exhaling sharply through his nostrils, emitting an angry puff of condensation, Will stormed back to his unit and pulled the door down harshly enough that it clanged, and the sound rattled out down the row, echoing from the faded fronts of the sealed units. The grinding sound stopped abruptly. Will held his breath. Ten beautiful seconds of silence followed. He thought he heard the man hum, but it was too muffled to be sure. A truck’s horn lowed far in the distance; all was right in the world.

And then the grinding started up again.

Will sank into his chair with his hands in his hair and groaned. Perhaps the stranger was attempting to fix his perfectly functioning engine himself, though why he would have to spend a night in a storage unit to achieve that was beyond Will. After a while, the long groans

turned to short, sharp pulsating whirs that were ten times more obnoxious than the previous sound. Will span the propeller, as he had been planning to do, but it was impossible to tell if it whistled cleanly through the air as he had hoped or if it was loud and laboured since all he could hear was the damnable man in 304. He had started alternating between the two sounds, as if finding the formula for maximum irritation.

Whir whir whir ***griiinnnddddd****.*

Whir whir whir ***griiinnnddddd.***

It was late, about the time that Will would normally be getting home, but to do so now would feel too much like admitting defeat. Instead, despite his aching head and a vague sense of hunger, Will began fitting and the motor's exterior.

Whir whir whir ***griiinnnddddd.***

A tiny screw slipped from his fingers and rolled off into the obscurity of the dark, dimpled concrete floor. Will ground his teeth and laughed through them mirthlessly.

Whir whir whir ***griiinnnddddd.***

His screwdriver slipped and jabbed the knuckle of his left thumb, taking a sizable chunk of skin with it.

Whir whir whir ***griiinnnddddd.***

There was a pack of stale cigarettes somewhere; Will had quit cold turkey when lung cancer had seen fit to take his only family from him. Now, he scrambled through the orderly stack of tool and tack boxes until he found them, shoved one between his lips and flung the door open; stepping into the night with his hands cupped, protecting the flame from his zippo until the end glowed orange. He was half way through his second, and feeling mildly nauseous, when the sound stopped, the car emerged from the unit, and the stranger from the car.

Leaning against the edge of the entrance to his own unit, Will watched him with thinly veiled disdain.

The stranger offered him an affected smile and put his hands behind his back. There was a moment, when he rocked back on his heels and appeared to be appreciating the quiet, that Will itched to stride forward and punch him.

"That was loud," he said, instead.

"I hope I didn't disturb you," the man replied, with a challenging twinkle in his eye.

Will took a long drag and blew the smoke out forcefully in his direction.

"Are you done?" He asked.

Instead of answering his question, the man tilted his head and considered him. It made the hairs at Will's nape stand to attention. He gripped his cigarette a little tighter.

“Truly, I didn’t expect to see another soul this far from the entrance,” and his face held the aura of a smirk, even while his mouth remained perfectly straight, “though I must say you are terribly territorial over this stretch of gravel.”

Will pushed himself off of the wall, unsure why he felt the need to make himself appear larger though compelled to do it regardless.

“I like the quiet,” he said, dropping his cigarette – unfinished - to the ground and stomping it out under the ball of his foot.

Up close, the man appeared to be only a few years older than Will himself. Perhaps his youth was more obvious without the hideous hat. Strands of his hair had fallen into his face, giving him a ruffled sort of poise.

“And the privacy, I’d wager,” the other said, closing the distance between them.

“What can I say,” Will replied, with narrowed eyes and a one-sided shrug, “I’m a private kind of person.”

“And I,” the other purred, stopping inches from Will and offering his hand. “Hannibal Lecter,” he added, when Will’s ingrained southern manners compelled him to take the proffered hand. His skin had a powdered feel to it.

“What were you doing in there?” Will asked, unable to help himself.

When it was clear that Hannibal wouldn’t restore the distance between them, Will shuffled back a few steps until his back was pressed to the wall again.

“Sculpting,” Hannibal said, then; “You’re being terribly rude.”

Will guffawed.

“*Excuse me*”?

“I gave you my name.”

Will huffed.

“I didn’t ask for it,” but then, because even Will could only be so impolite until he started to feel awkward, he added “Will Graham.”

Hannibal gave him a tight-lipped smile.

“You realise there are art studios in New Orleans?” Will grumbled.

“Yes, I’m aware but I like to keep my work to myself, at least until the grand reveal.”

“*Sculpting*,” Will muttered, like it was a dirty word.

“Hmm,” Hannibal replied, slinking backwards to his unit to pull the door closed, “I would be more than happy to show you my work in the future. Maybe even involve you in the process.”

“I really don’t find sculpting that interesting,” Will said with a grimace.

Grim Graham. He really couldn’t help himself.

Hannibal stooped to click the padlock into place and regarded Will over his shoulder.

“You might, with the right medium.”

Will didn’t like the steady way the other held his gaze. He darted his eyes up to the sky – there was very little light pollution this far out. The Great Cluster in Hercules was watching him back just as steadily.

“My medium is spark plugs and engine grease,” Will stated flatly.

“Ah, well if we’re referring to our work then my medium is the human body.” Hannibal replied, and then – before Will could reach for his spanner a second time – “I’m a medical student at Tulane University.”

Will swallowed audibly. His level of discomfort was inching steadily towards unbearable.

“I’m afraid I should be off, Will.” Hannibal said as he unlocked his car and slipped into the front seat.

Good riddance, Will thought, as the driver’s door closed.

The Bentley, which no student had any business driving, turned and as it inched past Will’s unit the window rolled down to reveal Hannibal’s mocking smile.

“I’ll see you again very soon, Will.”

The car made a smooth exit, front lights slicing through the night before turning the corner and dissolving into darkness. Will watched it go with a pit in his stomach. Just like that, his slice of self-imposed solitude had been stolen. *How much time could a medical student really have to sculpt for pleasure, though?* Will reassured himself as he began tidying the disorder he had created in his wild search for a burst of nicotine. He still felt a little queasy from that second cigarette and imagined that if he were to look in a mirror he’d have taken on a pallid, yellow hue. He blamed Hannibal Lecter.

It was nearing ten, and the lot was deserted, by the time Will’s beaten up Volvo followed the Bentley’s tracks through the gravel and out onto the highway. The drive back into the city was never as relaxing as the drive out, and this time that was particularly true. The whirring and grinding, and the unwelcome headlights and spitting gravel, seemed to follow Will home - playing on repeat in the back of his mind. When he arrived back at the apartment block, it was to the sound of muffled crying. He wondered if it had been going on like that all day and if, as a man of the law, he should act on it. He was still wondering as his feet carried him over the threshold to his own building and had all but forgotten about it when he reached the door

to his apartment. Cereal again for dinner, then a lukewarm shower before bed. He stared up at the damp patch until its black edges crept out and engulfed him, and he dreamt of nothing but babies in ushankas, carving death masks from granite in the low light of Syd's Storage.

Chapter 2

"…and Graham, patrol the French Quarter."

Having spent the last fifteen minutes staring over the Chief's shoulder, watching a crow entangled in a dispute with a takeout bag through the tilted slats of the louvered window, it took a moment for Will to return to the briefing and nod his assent. It hardly mattered, for by the time his eyes had refocussed and the words had been processed, the majority of the officers around him had filed off to their respective roles or made a beeline for the worn out coffee machine in the corner. The Chief himself had moseyed over to the new receptionist, a young thing in a modest blouse - wide eyed and eager to please. Will reached up to obscure his view of the impending complaint of misconduct with the frames of his glasses but was jostled by a few stragglers so that he ended up jabbing the bridge of his nose instead.

"Sorry, Grim," one of them called over their shoulder.

Will ducked his head and made for the exit, mourning the loss of free coffee. There was no way that he'd brave the swarm of boys in blue that had descended upon it this early in the morning and it looked like he'd be outdoors for the majority of the day. This in and of itself was preferable to being stuck inside of the station - with the clanging of file cabinets, whirring of budget desk fans and the continuous trill of the telephone – but did mean that he'd have to find a hole-in-the-wall coffee shop and dip into his own pocket to fund his caffeine requirements. As he stepped from the dim light and dust motes out onto the street, Will felt his shoulders hunch. *You should wear the badge with pride*, he'd been told during his training, *stop scuttling around like a miscreant*. They'd soon given up and assumed that poor posture was one of the inherent qualities that made Will Graham poorly suited, yet not unqualified, for the job.

His weekend had been steeped in misery, leaving Will to wonder why he seemed to be the only person in The Big Easy that found everything so hugely difficult. In the space of two days there were three consecutive street parties. Surely it was only fair that the revellers that had caused his sleep deprivation had the decency to be hungover on a terribly bright Monday morning, yet here they were indolently clogging the sidewalk. In the past it wouldn't have been so insufferable, in that Will wouldn't have stuck around to suffer it. Now though, the threat of a pretentious medical student's presence kept him from his workshop. *Hannibal Lecter,* he silently cursed the name with his grimmest of grimaces. He'd considered returning to the storage facility about three hours into that first street party, but he was already wound so tightly that he could only imagine the torrent of abuse he would have ended up throwing the other's way. He'd had to admit to himself that, really, Hannibal had done nothing wrong. That didn't take the sting out of having his refuge invaded though.

There was a brief moment where Will pictured Hannibal driving a host of armoured elephants towards his storage unit; the man himself sat astride broad, leathery shoulders and having the audacity to look unruffled. He could hardly blame him; conquering was in his name.

As luck would have it, Will found a coffee shop toting reasonably priced flat whites on a scruffy a-board just outside its door. As he approached, he caught sight of his scowl in the shop window and had to admit that there was some credence to the nickname he'd been lumped with. It took an alarming amount of effort to smooth it out into something more neutral and by that point several people had shoved past him and formed a queue. The coffee, when he finally got his hands on it, was not much better than the instant mulch at the station. It warmed his hands though, and steamed his glasses past the point of having to make eye contact with those passing by.

As Will patrolled, his mind wandered, and he was incredibly displeased to find that Hannibal was occupying an alarming number of his thoughts. Hannibal striding obnoxiously into Will's space. Hannibal's angular face titled up at the sky, posture wide and imposing. Hannibal's Bentley spitting gravel against Will's unit. Hannibal. Hannibal. Hannibal. He was almost thankful to find a well-versed drunk stumbling out of a bar and promptly freeing himself to urinate against the wall. *Long night*, Will thought - practically sympathised – and waited for him to finish up before taking his details. Will wasn't sure what he had expected from police work, but this wasn't it. When he'd first considered it, at perhaps five or six years old, he'd been immersed in the adventures of Kojak – sprawled on his stomach on a musty motel bed, eyes glues to the fuzzy little screen on top of the dresser. Like many children, he'd been drawn in by flashy Alfa Romeo, shattering sugar-glass windows, tinny gunshots and suspense. Frail and friendless, it wasn't a stretch to assume that a position of power also held some appeal. His peculiar penchant for reading people wasn't apparent to him at such a young age, even if the other children did seem to shy away from him as if they could sense something was wrong. That came later, along with the first unfortunate pains of puberty. It was the kind of curse that Will thought he could make the most of on the police force; quickly gathering someone's motive, making connections in a mess of evidence. Right now, it did little to help. In fact, Will would have turned it off if he had the slightest idea how.

This particular perpetrator of disorderly conduct had staggered from a bar at past eight in the morning, with the previous day's five o'clock shadow spattered in cheap beer and vomit. He was bloated, with the yellow pallor expected of drunks and the malnourished. Poor, probably. Almost definitely recently divorced – if the pale band of skin on his ring finger was anything to go by. Which, of course, it was. Will knew how to disregard the things that didn't matter. The pinprick in the crook of his arm for instance was not evidence of a drug addiction as much as it hinted at the man finding himself paralytic on so many occasions that the emergency room might as well have kept the canula in him for easy access. He was lumbering man, world-weary and unattractive with sagging, sad eyes. Will felt instantly sorry for him and let him off with a warning. He'd drink himself to death in a matter of years regardless. Perhaps it was this reminder of the brevity of life that made Will resolve to visit his unit. What were the chances Hannibal would be there again?

As it happened, the chances were high. After dashing back to his apartment to change and making it to the unit in record time, Will was jaded to find that Hannibal had already arrived. He had not seen fit to squeeze his entire car alongside him again, for the sleek, black Bentley was parked just outside of the closed garage-style door. The unbearable noise, however, was exactly the same as it had been on the previous occasion – as tooth-rattling as a dental bur. Pressing a finger and thumb to his temples, where pressure was already beginning to build, Will let himself into his workshop. He flicked the light switch and then turned to close the

door behind him as the bulb buzzed above him for half a second before coming to life with a click. It left him blinking against the brightness with eyes accustomed to dark roads and distant streetlamps from the drive to the storage lot. Muttering beneath his breath, he crossed his little space to the aged but sturdy wooden chair in the corner and slumped down into it. The grinding and whirring continued on as he searched his coat pockets for his aspirin. After swallowing two pills dry, Will let his head fall back against the brick wall and groaned. He considered returning home, but the couple next door had been fighting again when he left.

Somewhere, among the neat but substantial stack of salvaged motors, generators and boat propellers was an old radio, reminiscent of the boombox his neighbour had had when he was a teenager. Will had found it under a soggy, handwritten sign toting free ‘furniture’, though the radio was accompanied only by a stool with one leg missing and a drenched beanbag spilling it’s filling out onto the street. He’d dried it in rice and had been pleasantly surprised to find that the only permanent damage was a crack to the circuit board. He’d always envied his neighbour, who’d had a small but respectable collection of nice things. The radio beckoned the dirt-poor teen in him, though he could have afforded something better if he’d truly wanted a radio in the first place. Still, it could be a blessing now if he got it working and so he abandoned the vintage boat motor – hefting it apologetically aside – and set to work with his soldering iron.

There was a point, between dismantling the radio and unspooling the long coil of solder, that Will fished a beer from the redundant ice box he kept on the shelves anchored to the back wall. It was lukewarm but succeeded in chasing away the taste that the pill’s powdered coating had left on his tongue. The circuit board’s components and silver dots looked up at Will like a birds-eye view of a City and he briefly forgot that his life was perpetually disappointing. The sound of Hannibal’s sculpting faded into distant white noise and Will chased down the first beer with a second. It probably shouldn’t have surprised him so much when his hand slipped and the soldering iron branded a stripe across his knuckles. The double dose of pills and alcohol did nothing to dull the pain and he cussed, dropping the iron and solder to the floor – though not before decorating his hand in silver dots like poorly applied, *molten hot* henna.

He stumbled a little on his way out of the unit, cradling his hand to his chest, and even overcome with white hot pain the voice in his head did not refrain from pointing out the similarities between Will and the public urinator he had encountered earlier that morning. It took three attempts to fit the keys into his car door and retrieve the half bottle of stale water from the glove compartment. Only after upending it over his hand in a flurry of frantic breathing, did Will lift his head and realise that Hannibal was stood across from him. Clearly having intended to step into his car, he had paused with the door open and was regarding Will with a tilted head and the hint of dark amusement in the narrowing of his eyes. Trying, and failing, to maintain eye contact, Will did his best to put on a brave face but felt his lower lip tremble despite himself. He twisted the expression into a frown, but it had already been caught. Hannibal’s head tilted a little further to the side and the tip of his tongue darted lightning fast between his lips. Will thought of the forked tongues of snakes testing the air for prey and took a step to the side so that his car stood more directly between them.

The vehicular barrier did little to deflect the medical student however, as he bent elegantly to slide something out from under his passenger seat and began crossing the distance between

them. It was only when he rounded Will's car bonnet that it became clear he was holding a first aid kit.

"May I?" He asked, a little eagerly, with an outstretched hand.

Will placed his hand in Hannibal's, a little *less* eagerly. In fact, he held it stubbornly to his chest and, for a moment, considered telling him where to stick it. He snorted at the thought and felt Hannibal considering his face for a moment before returning his attention to his hand. Hannibal's were soft and freshly clean. Will could detect the stinging scent of surgical spirit – the type used in abundance in hand sanitiser and anti-septic wipes. He could hardly have known that Will would injure himself, and so they weren't pristine - practically sparkling beneath the glow from the unit - for *Will's* benefit. As his blistered hand was turned this way and that, Will wondered if all medical students were pinnacles of cleanliness or if Hannibal were the exception; adverse to the film of clay dust his sculpting no doubt caused – to the point of eradicating all evidence that it had ever been there. Will himself often left the lot up to his elbows in engine grease, or with his shirt smeared in fuel or WD-40.

"You appear to be burnt, Will." Hannibal stated, as if that much weren't obvious. He looked as though he wanted to say something more but pinched his lips shut, though the narrowing of his eyes gave him away again.

"And you find that amusing?" Will asked, bitterness seeping into his words. It was difficult to be polite, even to the man tending to your wounds, when said wounds were still felt as if they were blistering above an open flame.

Apparently surprised to have be called out on it, Hannibal blinked his face back to neutrality and dropped Will's hand in favour of placing the first aid kit on the hood of the car and searching through the contents. It was well stocked, Will arched his neck to see a little clearer despite himself; plasters, antiseptic spray, disposable gloves – everything you'd expect of a boy scout or soccer mom – but also curved needles and surgical thread and…

"Is that a scalpel?" Will asked, dubiously.

Plucking a conular tube of burn gel and some dressings from his supplies, Hannibal replied; "One can never be too prepared," and inclined his head to Will's new disfigurement as if to say, *see*?

"What does *one* even use a scalpel for?" Will asked, aware that he was being deliberately obtuse but unable to blame anyone other than the man in front of him for his current predicament.

"A great deal more than you might think," he replied, applying the gel in one swift, practiced motion and then setting to work with the dressings.

"Thanks," Will mumbled, shoulders sagging a little as the throbbing heat across his knuckles calmed some.

"And thank you for the practice," Hannibal quipped, drawing a begrudging laugh in response.

He held Will's hand for a little longer than was comfortable once he was done and Will shuffled awkwardly form foot to foot to fight to urge to yank it away.

"You smell of beer," Hannibal observed aloud.

Will furrowed his brow, the urge to pull his hand back growing in intensity, and wondered if he had meant to be so blunt or if it was due to the language barrier. He quickly dismissed that thought. Really, Hannibal seemed to speak better English than he did.

"A cautionary tale," Will muttered, flexing his hand until Hannibal dropped it.

"And possibly another," Hannibal said, giving Will's hand a final cursory once over before pivoting cleanly on his heel to pack away his supplies. "If you plan on driving, that is."

Will watched him rewrap the remaining gauze tightly and then shift the contents of the kit around so that the burn cream could sit precisely parallel to a tube of Savlon. He spared a glance into his own car, clean but certainly not tidy; jump leads loosely spooled and overflowing from the car door compartment, a pair of hiking boots in the passenger footwell, and a spread of second-hand CDs sharing the backseat with an empty jerry can. Seemingly unperturbed by Will's lack of response, Hannibal finished tidying up at a leisurely pace. When he turned back though, his eyes had taken on an intensity that made Will's stomach lurch. Day to day, Will did his best to avoid eye contact; be it through the use of heavy-framed glasses or a general refusal to look up from the ground. With Hannibal though, Will found himself drawn to meet his eyes – wrenched towards them like two blackholes.

"I'd be more than happy to drive you home. Consider it an extension of my duty of care," Hannibal said pleasantly.

Too pleasantly. His tone did not match the sharp edges of his expression. It struck Will quite how absurd it was for a stranger – bordering on nemesis if Will were asked – to offer to go so out of his way.

"Yeah, uh, no-" He replied, with a barked laugh. "Thank you," he quickly added, lifting his bandaged appendage up between them, "-for the hand. But I'll just wait it out here until I'm safe to drive."

When Hannibal merely inclined his head and bid him a good night, walking placidly back to his car, Will humoured the idea that he himself may have been acting more than a little paranoid. Still, it was the appropriate thing to do – to turn the offer down; the kind of offer made with fingers crossed behind ones back while silently chanting '*please don't take me up on it'*. Will himself had long ago stopped offering gestures of kindness in order to avoid that dreaded few seconds in which the person in question might decide to accept. People could be draining and while Will could play a part and hit all the right social cues with enough effort, he'd rather not have to. He was drawn from his thoughts when Hannibal spoke up from beside his car, voice carrying across the distance between them seemingly without him having to raise it at all.

"Perhaps attempt to resist the lure of anymore sacrificial fires, Scævola," he called, the taunt evident in his voice.

Hannibal was not the first, and likely wouldn't be the last, to make assumptions regarding Will's intelligence or level of education. Poverty was writ in his posture, in the incongruent muddle of accents that hinted at a transient life.

"How cheap the body is to men who have their eye on great glory," Will muttered, the words tumbling out like a challenge before he could stop himself.

It wasn't the sort of thing Will would normally have said. No one had spoken to him in quite such a pretentious way before – with pretty words and perfect fluidity. Growing up Will had emulated his father's gruff, stunted way of talking and had assumed that was *his* way of talking too, before finding himself copying his social worker's soft, lilting pleasantries just as successfully. His response wasn't *all* mimicry. Will was well read; as a child he had hungered for the written word regardless of the content. It was the safe and one-sided communication that he had thought he longed for; nothing expected from him in return and therefore no pauses to be filled with insults or uncomfortable glances. When the most local library became nothing but a husk to him, and the dog-eared, defaced texts at school had all been devoured, Will saved up enough for bus fare into the city and pilfered the more eclectic selections he found there. As a result, he was perpetually brimming with thoughts and opinions, some of them contradictory and most of them loud enough to keep him up at night; an avalanche of ideas pummelling the weary, white walls of his skull.

And so, the thoughts were his own, but the composition more often belonged to someone else. Much like how notes existed long before someone parsed them into crotchets and quavers and scattered them across a page.

Hannibal's brow rose a fraction and then settled just as quickly. Will huffed quietly, swelling with bitter satisfaction at having proved him wrong.

"You resemble him," Hannibal said, tilting his head as if genuinely considering the likeness. "At least, the version of Scævola displayed at the Louvre. It's the curls, I think. Perhaps the sternness."

Just as quickly as he had gained the upper hand, Will found himself floundering. He raised a hand to the back of his neck and grimaced as Hannibal tracked the movement. The uncomfortable twist in his stomach suggested he wanted nothing more than for Hannibal to leave, but he found himself speaking up instead of letting him go. His voice cracked as he spoke.

"I feel less brave, Roman youth and more knuckle-rapped child."

For all of Will's discomfort, Hannibal appeared momentarily amused. His lips twitched into a half smile.

"What was it he said?" Hannibal asked, though Will was not surprised when he immediately answered his own question. "When adversity strikes, we suffer bravely. Do you suffer bravely, Will?"

It felt an awful lot like standing his ground, this strange, distanced conversation. An awful lot like a pissing competition. *This storage lot's not big enough for the both of us*, Will imagined

himself saying. Perhaps he was more affected by the beer than he'd first thought. Still, one didn't have to be sober to acknowledge the threat lacing Hannibal's words. Scævola's words, really, though the composition was *entirely* his own. Swallowing the dry lump in his throat, Will considered his life. Friendless, without family. Hollow on a good day, wracked with intangible agony if it were bad. *Do I look brave?* He wanted to ask. *Because I'm suffering.*

Hannibal didn't give him time to do so, thankfully; sliding into his car, leaving will to think on it. When the Bentley purred to life and pulled slowly away, Will raised his bandaged hand in parting and hoped that this bizarre incident of territorial passive-aggression wouldn't mean that he and Hannibal would forever more be required to make small talk when they bumped into one another.

Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

The riper rips, Will sips.

The next morning started off like any other; wrenched from a nightmare by the plaintive droning of his phone. Will stared blankly at the mould spot, as was customary, and then passively absorbed his neighbours verbalised discontent as he dressed. He walked to work – it took less time than driving in a town where pedestrians refused to acknowledge the difference between roads and sidewalk – and felt groggy with sleep despite the bite in the air. He wondered if he would be on patrol again and, if that were the case, whether or not he would have to stop the same drunk from watering the weeds that sprouted stubbornly from the cracks in the cobblestone. The skin of his hand felt stretched taut. The bandaged had unravelled at some point in the night, no doubt due to the frantic thrashing about that had had Will jerking to life drenched in cold sweat, and the skin across his knuckles was raised and raw. He had slept with his hands bunched into fists and now he could only open the injured one so much. Despite taking more than the recommended dose of aspirin; the pain stayed with him – hot and persistent.

The first hint that the morning would not *remain* like any other, was the blue stripe of a police cruiser bolting past him as he turned onto the sidewalk perpendicular to the station and made to cross the road. While it was almost certainly travelling above the speed limit, there were no strobing lights nor shrieking sirens and it was heading towards the station as opposed to away from it. Will blinked tiredly as he crossed the street and watched the car come to a stop just ahead of him. Bates, and his partner Myers, slipped out from the front seat and then gently escorted a trembling woman into the station. She was dressed for work, in smart black slacks and a matching blazer, but her mascara had bled nearly down to her chin. The second sign that Will's day was about to take a turn, was the fact that it was almost precisely eight o'clock, and yet the chief was not partaking in his established routine of smoking a cigar under the station sign and considering every passer-by with narrowed eyes; as if they were each waiting to turn the corner out of sight and commit a litany of crimes. Will discovered him barking orders from the open door of his office instead, one hand in his thinning, grey hair and the other gripping a manila file hard enough to crumple it.

"Graham!" He thundered, eyes landing on him as he entered the station, side-stepping past a line of officers filing out onto the street. "All officers to Audubon park. *Now."*

Will gave a stiff nod and turned to follow the rest of the force, surprised when even the chief fell into step beside him.

"You have anything hearty for breakfast, Graham?" He grumbled, patting his pockets down, presumably for the overdue cigar.

“Sir?” He asked, brow crumpled in confusion and chest starting to restrict with the first waves of something that was not *solely* panic.

“Whatever you had, it won’t be – ah,” he cut himself off when his fingers found what he was looking for and lit it up before continuing, “it won’t be staying down for long. You’ve never seen anything like this before.”

A thick spiral of black smoke filled the space between them, the chief sputtering on a cough as he matched the pace of his officers. His next words came out muffled around the girth of the cigar.

“Christ Graham, you won’t be the only grim fucker around here today. Prepare yourself.”

~

The main gate to Audubon park was a shock of black and yellow; a criss-cross of tape with POLICE, CAUTION, DANGER printed in obnoxiously bold font. The attempt to deter was obvious in the design - a barricade the colour of wasps, poison dart frogs and venomous snakes – but it had achieved exactly the opposite. A crowd had gathered; a mass of people shouldering past one another, necks straining to see what lay beyond. They writhed like a single, hungry creature, and Will felt some trepidation at the notion of trying to cut through them. Still, it was a relief to step from the cruiser. He had ridden with four others and had somehow ended up awkwardly straddling the middle seat, crushed from either side. He rolled out his shoulders, took a breath of fresh air and couldn’t help but perk up at the notion that, whatever he was about to encounter, he would finally be experiencing something more in line with what he had imagined police work would provide.

The others shoved past the crowd, demanding passage, and so Will merely had to stumble along behind them. He ducked beneath the tape, eyes scanning the expanse of trimmed grass. Besides the small entourage of vested canines and their handlers combing the grass for evidence, this part of the park was devoid of anything untoward. Will felt his lips twitch up when one of the formidable hounds raised its head, but the dog merely looked past him for a second and then returned dutifully to work. They were directed down a winding path; at first bordered by young trees in galvanised metal guards and then later hemmed by uncut grass and a smattering of wildflowers. As they left the orderly floriculture behind and smell of wild garlic began to permeate the air, the officers chatter died down to something less offensive. It meant that when Will stepped out onto the bank of a river, everything – even the body – was perfectly calm.

Cameras shuttered intermittently around him, people murmured as gently as the reeds whispered at their feet, but other than that it was quiet enough to hear his own, stuttering breath. One of Will’s teachers had had a Claude Monet painting pinned to her bulletin board – printed with the school’s cheap ink on a piece of A4 paper but beautiful regardless – and the scene before him now was eerily similar. A curved bridge above a river. The water was calm; a pear-green sheet interspersed only by the wavering algae that had broken off from the edges to cluster at the centre. There was a weeping willow*, kind of the killer to provide a mourner*, and it cast dark green, branching shadows across the water’s surface. It was the type of space where even Will might have found peace, if not for the body stretched out in repose along the thick, stone arris of the arched bridge. It was a young man, with blanched

skin and blue lips, draped in red velvet with his face tilted to look out across the water. This in itself broadcasted a certain level of tranquillity, if one ignored the gaping cavern of the corpse's abdomen – ribs wrenched out and spread wide like the teeth of some beastly maw, heart nowhere to be seen.

An absence of blood. Will had assumed that the first time he came across a murder scene, there would be more blood.

"Christ sake," the Chief hollered, as an officer doubled over and spilled his stomach contents a mere few meters from the crime scene. "Get out of here!"

His eyes roved and once again landed on Will. With the gesture of one blunt thumb towards the corpse, he was beckoned.

Will had thought his legs might shake, but besides a hushed sort of disassociation that had corporealised and static in his ears, he felt like his usual self. When he set one foot on the bridge, he caught the first whiff of the body; a putrid sweetness, nowhere near as offensive as the stench of the rotting rabbit corpses he had found as a child, swaying gently from disregarded snares. He wondered what made the difference. The lack of blood? A fresh body? It didn't look fresh, nor decayed; suspended in time. Lonely.

"Put these on," the Chief grunted, slapping a pair of latex gloves against his chest, he glanced briefly at his blistered knuckles but didn't ask "and tuck those damn curls into your hat."

Will did as he was bid, eyes never leaving the body. Hazy grey eyes stared off into the middle distance. Will wanted to lie beside him and see what he saw. He looked restful, if painfully sad.

"Now, obviously, I know you've collected evidence before, Graham but this is the big time now. You put everything you're handed into its own bag. You seal it. You put it in the evidence box. Think *you* can handle that without contaminating the scene with your goddamn vomit?" He glared over Will's shoulder, presumably at the officer who had been unfortunate enough to have been picked first.

Will gave a single nod, tore his eyes away from the corpse and stooped to collect an evidence bag just in time for another officer to pass him a spotlessly clean wallet.

"Don't. Puke." The chief warned again punctuating each word with a jab of a thick finger to Will's chest, before heading off to do something more in line with his paycheque than a simple bag and tag.

The wallet was complete with ID and credit cards. No attempt at all to hide the identity of the victim. No attempt at all to hide anything other than the identity of the killer themselves. *Himself*, Will thought, as he tried to imagine the strength it took to carry a body to a river more than a five-minute walk away from the nearest road. No clothes, just the modesty provided by the red draping, and yet a small collection of the victim's personal belongings had been left alongside him. A packet a breath mints, half empty, went into the next bag. A pot of hair product next. Keys after that, a Porsche keyring dangling from the chain. A single daffodil was the only thing Will truly paused to consider. The next pieces of evidence were

handed to him pre-bagged; one of the victim's fingernails, what may or may not have been a piece of chipped, human rib. These went into a different box.

When they returned to the station several hours later, it was to gather around a bulletin board already adorned with various shots of the body. It had been most poignant from the spot in which Will had first viewed it, stepping from the closed-off path and onto the open riverbank. There were no pictures from that angle and the photographs taken made the scene seem like a cheap reproduction of itself. At that moment, perusing a shot that had been taken up-close, without the calm green water in view, that Will truly acknowledged the level of thought that had gone into the design. He wondered how many times the killer had stepped down from the bridge to view his work as it would first be seen and make adjustments.

"The body was found at seven AM," the chief said, waiting a moment with raised brows for the din of voices to peter out. "The poor broad that discovered it had been taking the long route to work. The scenic route."

It had certainly delivered.

"We've questioned the woman, identified the victim and contacted his family. Evidence has been sent off, but there's not much of it. Bruising around the neck points to strangulation as cause of death." He ran a hand down over his bearded chin and considered the board before continuing.

"Best we can tell, it's a crime of passion."

The statement jarred. Will, standing towards the back of the crowd where it was easier to breathe, rocked up on the balls of his feet to get another look at the photographs over the sea of wide shoulders and close-shaven heads.

"The missing heart is a big tell. The flower, too," The chief went on, stance wide and shoulders on his hips. "Willis, dig into the vic's romantic life. Any partners? Fuck buddies? I don't care if the last person he dated was his high school prom date, find out."

"Why a daffodil?" Will asked, regretting speaking aloud when all heads turned to him. He swallowed audibly, but it was too late to take the statement back.

The chief rocked back on his heels.

"If you're gonna interrupt me Graham, at least speak up."

"Sorry Chief," he ground out, forcing his voice to rise in volume until it wavered under the scrutiny of the rest of the force, "but wouldn't it be a rose? If it were a crime of passion?"

There was a tense moment in which the Chief's eyes darkened and the nothing but the static from the ceiling lights seemed to buzz around them.

"That so Grim?" Myers called, unwittingly doing Will a favour by slicing through the Chief's tangible ire "Send a lot of roses, do you?"

He felt his face flush as a handful of the other officers started to chuckle.

“Knock it off.” The Chief ordered gruffly, but his eyes stayed on Will. “You explain it to me then, Graham. Since you’re the expert, apparently.”

More chuckles.

Will felt briefly as he had when Hannibal had made a deliberate effort to quash him with some sort of elitist show of power the night before. What would an awkward, dirt-poor swamp dweller know about Roman mythology or crimes of passion? His hackles rose.

“It was all too carefully done,” he said, in a firm, steady voice that he hoped didn’t sound as effected it was. “Crimes of passion are done in the heat of the mo-.”

“Cause of death, Graham? As far as we can tell at this point, anyway.” The chief interrupted.

“Strangulation, Sir,” Will muttered, shuffling awkwardly with the dawning realization that the chief was about to make an example of him.

“And do you know the most common motives for strangulation, Graham?”

Will swallowed again and nodded.

“Well, don’t leave me guessing, Graham.” The Chief mocked, “You’re the expert, not me.”

“Sexual jealousy, sir,” Will bit out, staring a hole in the floor with the hope that it might swallow him up.

“Well shit, Graham. Sounds like you’re telling me it’s a crime of passion.”

Will nodded silently at the puke-coloured carpet at his feet.

“Besides,” the Chief continued, sounded rather content at having put a subordinate in his place. “This killer is sorry as sorry gets. Even gave the vic his stuff back.”

Will nodded again and thought of the evidence he had bagged. The breath mints, pricey keyring, hair product. No crumpled receipts or pocket lint to be found. The killer had not given him *all* of his stuff back. Lesson learned; he kept that titbit to himself.

He was still pondering that as he left for work. And still, as he changed at home and made for his unit. So engrossed was he with his killer, that he did not stop to remember that his unit was no longer the space of solace if had once been. There was no Bentley to remind him though when he turned down the gravel road and pulled up outside unit 302. Everything was crisp and quiet; barely even a rumble of traffic in the distance. It was a night for stargazing, he decided, pulling his old chair out through the door and collapsing back into it with his head propped against the brick wall behind him. There was very little light pollution. Will could gaze up at the unfathomable and put the enigmatic nature of murder into perspective. He had a beer in hand, constellations above – the Chiefs remarks and the snide looks from his fellow officers could be tucked away. Will tucked a lot of things away. But, as the stares blurred under his scrutiny, his mind began to wander.

He supposed he must have been out on the hushed riverbank when Hannibal arrived, having not heard the scattering of gravel under his tires.

“I see you’ve not learned your lesson,” he remarked, stepping from his vehicle and coming to stand beside him.

Will blinked himself back into the present and tilted his face to look up at the other. It still felt slack and expressionless; his body not yet caught up with the knowledge that he was no longer alone with only the memory of a quiet corpse for company. Hannibal too was watching the stars.

“I had a rough day at work,” he murmured, raising his bottle to his lips to take a pointed swig.

Hannibal was smiling; not the minute tilt of lips that Will had seen before but a toothy grin, not unlike a child. It made Will uncomfortable. He was about to duck his head but Hannibal moved first, turning back and tilting his sharp chin upwards at the sky once more.

“You seem happy,” Will acknowledged, frowning at the fact that he had now willingly entered into conversation with the other.

“You do not.” Hannibal replied. “Mechanical struggles?”

“I told you,” Will huffed, and then – after taking a swig of beer, “I’m not a mechanic.”

Will couldn’t blame him, really. His flannel was wrinkled and more oil stain than plaid. There was a long pause; Hannibal still looking at the stars and Will still looking at *him*. Will may have appeared every bit the mechanic, but Hannibal presented a visage that seemed congruent with neither sculptor nor medical student. Smart, certainly, but rather than donning a simple shirt and tie - something you could drape a labcoat over – he was practically *adorned* in burgundy brocade. A double-breasted suit jacket, a fitted vest, a velvet tie and crisp, navy shirt beneath. It was fairly cold, though Will wasn’t surprised to see Hannibal’s coat draped over one arm; the gaudy combination looked stuffy and claustrophobic. Will tried to imagine the exacting way he must sculpt in order to emerge from his unit without even a spec of clay dust on his clothes.

“Are you going to make me guess?” Hannibal asked, eventually. He held his hands behind his back, still smiling up at the sky.

“I’m a cop,” Will stated flatly. No reason to lie, even if he were equally uninvested in telling the truth.

Hannibal’s face, or what Will could see of it from this angle, became very still and then his eyes narrowed minutely before relaxing again and settling easily on the constellations. He hummed.

“And what troubles you, deputy Graham?” He asked.

Other than unwarranted prying?

Will sighed and stared down the neck of his bottle into darkness. This was the closest thing he had had to a friendly conversation in weeks. Beneath layers upon layers of eccentric formalwear, Hannibal was another human being and Will was lonely.

“You’re telling me you didn’t hear about the murder on the bridge?”

“I did.” Hannibal answered, face still a stone, “That must have been very traumatic.”

“It’s not that.” Will answered, swirling his beer dismissively, before realising that it probably *should* be that. Truly, his aggravation hadn’t started to simmer until the chief had rejected his opinion.

When he peered back up, Hannibal was looking down his nose at him, one fine eyebrow raised. Will cringed.

“I’m not exactly permitted to talk about it,” he said, attempting to distract from his previous statement.

He took another long draw from the beer bottle with his eyes closed. When he opened them, Hannibal was still watching him.

“Not even in vagueries?” He asked.

Will was aware that he should have expected the morbid curiosity. It had been obvious among the crowd at the gates that morning and, if Will had had any friends, they too would have probably pressed him for a few dark details. He supposed that most officers got some relief in unloading on the people in their lives – especially when even their Chief refused to lend any credence to their deductions. If only Will had people in his life.

“Just a disagreement,” Will said, before allowing himself to think on it anymore. “They think it’s a certain type of crime. I disagree.”

He could feel the frown lines etching themselves into his face as he spoke. Soon he would be as harrowed on the outside as he was on the inside.

“Ah, a crime of passion according to the local news,” Hannibal mused. He was gazing out in front of him now, at the adjacent row of units, face inscrutable.

Will scoffed and finished his beer. When Hannibal glanced briefly his way, he nodded absently. He was thinking of the cool green filter that had seemed to shroud everything that morning. A crime of passion would have been as red as the blood that had been all but extracted from the scene.

“I saw a picture online. I would say not,” Hannibal murmured after a moment.

Despite his aversion toward the other man, Will couldn’t help but admit that it was good to know someone felt the same. The rest of the force seemed to operate on a different wavelength to Will and, try as he might, he couldn’t claw his way in. He was screaming always through thick glass; his thoughts appearing muffled and distorted to their ears. He felt

he made sense, but there was no way of forcing them to acknowledge something that they couldn't sense. He and they had seen different tableaus that morning; *his* a private viewing.

"Why not?" He asked, before he could stop himself. There was something urgent in his voice.

"It was a blurry picture, snapped before the police cordoned off the area, but it appeared rather…premeditated." Hannibal answered.

"Practically composed," Will agreed.

They stayed that way, watching the same stars, for a little while longer.

"Don't you have sculpting to do?" Will asked, but without the usual bite.

"Not tonight," Hannibal replied, "My most recent piece has finally taken form."

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Nothing came of the fingernail or chipped bone which, as it turned out, was actually a piece of decorative white stone from a fountain further along the path. There were no prints. Not even a single hair that didn't belong to the victim. The only mistake the killer *might* have made, was leaving half of a footprint pressed into the softer ground at the river's edge – though really, that could have belonged to anyone that had passed the bridge at some point during the previous evening. The chief had them note the shoe size and study the tread pattern regardless. The print was pointed at the toe, with only a few, shallow vertical grooves. Will assumed the footprint of a murderer would denote the chunky, gridded tread of a hiking boot or something similar. He didn't envy Bates, who had the misfortune of being tasked with flipping through a reference of the footwear impressions taken from everyone who had been brought into custody in the past five years. Will was nearly certain that the chief was chasing emblems of false hope – and was perhaps even aware of the futility of it all. They were a half-cocked force, unversed in this sort of flagrantly artistic homicide.

The victim, Marc Roux, was a bachelor with a slew of sexual partners – all female and petite, none that seemed particularly obsessed nor stilted. The Chief's *crime of passion* was looking less and less likely with every passing day.

Will watched him tear red string down from the evidence board over the yellowing rim of his mug. It was not a terrible view with which to enjoy his morning coffee. He couldn't refute that he felt as bitter as the bulk-bought bean residue swirling sluggishly at the bottom of his mug in the wake of the thorough dressing down the chief had bestowed upon him. Even in the current, macabre circumstances, each day that the chief grew terser, sweatier, and seemed to be patting his pockets for a cigar more often than not, was a day that Will felt just a little more satisfied. It was a pleasant change to be feeling anything other than *numb* and *alone*.

It had taken two days for the Chief to approach Will, huffing audibly at the side of his desk while he finished typing up a report.

"Sir?" Will asked, voice flat, raising his head but looking down at the rim of his glasses.

"Give it your best shot, Graham," he grunted, waving behind him at the board. "Can't do any worse than these other yahoos."

The Chief followed him to the corkboard, practically breathing down the collar of his shirt, and Will had to clench his jaw to stop from cringing. The stench of cigar smoke and desperation was particularly unpleasant this early in the morning. A print of the body on the bridge – taken from the wrong angle – was at the centre, with a picture of the footprint to its right and the daffodil to the left.

"Where are the rest of his things?" Will asked, eyes darting to the empty space as if frowning at it hard enough might make the other pictures appear.

“Don’t know what a wallet and some breath mints look like, Graham? If that’s what you’re starting with then we have even less hope than I thought.”

It wasn’t too difficult to push the older man out, along with the tip-tap of fingers on cheap keyboards and the whir of the fans. The longer Will stared at the photographs, the further the Chief and all other distractions faded into the background. He started with what he had: the daffodil. Will knew a little about floriculture, and for mythology and symbolism he had an almost pretentious body of knowledge. Therefore, Narcissus came to mind quickly, where another genus might not have. It wasn’t much of a riddle; the killer hadn’t left the flower there as a red herring but rather as a title to his work. He had, however, grossly underestimated the lengths to which the majority of the officers would go to avoid things pertaining to flowers and poetry as opposed to guns and statistics.

“The vic came from money.” Will recalled, “He’s entitled.”

“The exes certainly seemed to think so,” the Chief guffawed somewhere in the distance, still clinging to his own theory. It was the sort of remark that the other officers would have answered with a snort of comradery. Will rarely responded to anything the others said and, when he did, his response only ever earned him noncommittal hums or a mocking sideways glance.

“And attractive,” Will murmured.

Case and point.

“If you say so, Graham.”

Will could practically hear the chief’s eyes rolling off to the side in their sockets, looking for someone to share the acknowledgement that Will was abnormal. He no doubt found someone. Will could feel their eyes burning into his back.

“Symmetrical features, well-groomed,” Will went on, almost defensively, nodding as a large part of the puzzle fell into place. “Roux was last seen getting gas?”

“Sure was.”

“Where’s the receipt?” He asked himself aloud, closing his eyes and steepling his fingers beneath his chin.

It was difficult to imagine having his life together to such an extent that he’d be able to plan and carry out the murder, butchery and intricate display of a body when in his own life, Will rarely remembered to set his alarm before passing out. Difficult, but not impossible. Slipping into the killer’s shoes – which may or may not have left their mark on the riverbank – Will pictured himself under the light of the waxing moon and stars - or, perhaps more accurately, the distance glow of the cityscape.

He had undressed the body; that was a prerequisite for wrenching open the chest cavity and leaving the pale planes draped in velvet. Shedding the burdensome, dead or unconscious, body of its clothing wouldn’t have been easy; pockets turned out and contents spilled to the

floor. But no, it wasn't done hastily. As much as he was imagining himself in the place of the murderer, this wasn't the work of a stressed and jittery orphaned cop. This was a debut and the debutant would have taken their time; would have ensured they emptied the pockets first, of *everything*.

"Where's the receipt?" He muttered, again, blinking his eyes open and frowning at the attention he had drawn during his silent introspection.

Heads turned back to computer screen, fingers continues their typing, and the chief went red in the face.

"We're not investigating the possibility he got some damn gas, Graham! We've got it on tape, for one." He barked, assuming the question had been for him.

The next one was.

"And he's handed a receipt?"

"For the love of god, yes. And before you ask where it is, it probably fell from his pocket when he was being strangled to death."

"Or it didn't suit the theme," Will murmured, lips parting as the crime scene unfolded behind closed lids. "The gel, the mints, the Porshe; it's all the to do with appearance."

The Chief shuffled up beside him and squinted dubiously at the board. A whiff of stale smoke and coffee breath joined him, so Will edged away from him, ending up even closer to the photographs than he had been before.

"What are you getting at, Graham?"

Lifting his hand to tap printed yellow petals, Will cleared his throat so he could present his argument with enough confidence to avoid further ridicule. It hadn't escaped his notice that the few officers scattered around them had stopped their talking and typing once more and were instead watching him intently. He swallowed audibly.

"Narcissus is another name for daffodil," he said.

"Like *narcissist*?" The chief interrupted.

Will nodded, unable to continue before the Chief's gruff voice cut in again.

"The killer thought Roux was a narcissist?"

"I think so," Will replied, and tried not to let his voice lilt up at the end of the sentence and give away his uncertainty.

He could read people, certainly, but he'd never had to read a murderer before – and from as little as a brief glimpse at the scene and then a small collage of photographs. A two-dimensional replica, painted in pixels, was every bit as subjective as an abstract painting. Will was gazing, with second-hand revulsion, primarily through the eyes of the photographer.

At the bridge, as brief as his time there had been, he had taken his first few tentative steps in the shoes of the killer and his first thoughts had been of Monet. Will wondered if the killer considered himself an artist. He *felt* that it was case. He was cautiously excited, wanting with a physical ache to be correct.

"And that's enough to kill someone?" The Chief demanded, as if it were Will that had committed the crime.

He gave a one-shouldered shrug in response while thinking *yes, for this killer it's more than enough*. There was silence, thick and tangible and long enough for Will to turn and try to get a grasp on the Chief's thoughts.

"I disagree, Graham," He said, and Will's shoulders sagged. "Why the apologetic posing of the body?"

Will considered dropping it. Pretending the Chief was correct and bowing to his 'superior' knowledge, but the way Hannibal had tested him, and not found him wanting, came to mind. The Chief was dismissing him, just like everyone else besides his father had. It was rude.

"It's not apologetic, it's *depreciating*," Will bit out, and raised his hands apologetically when the Chief's expression turned thunderous.

"The killer's showing us why he deserved to die. He's a narcissist, like Narcissus gazing at his own reflection," Will explained, levelling his voice and staring grimly back down at the dark rim of his glasses. As much a feigned sign of submission as it was an attempt to avoid eye contact.

It seemed to be show of subjugation enough for the Chief, whose face fell slightly softer, slightly more thoughtful.

"Hardly the best water for gazing at your own reflection, but I suppose a killer can't be too picky."

Perhaps, Will would later think, he should have left it there; allowed the Chief to think that was the case, but his words came to him unbidden – leaving his lips as soon as the thoughts formed.

"He'd have chosen this one, even if there were clearer rivers in more remote places," he asserted, ardour evident in the firm set of his shoulders and a rare unwavering look in the Chief's direction. "The lack of reflection is deliberate. His narcissism was what made him deserving of death; he doesn't get to have the company of his own reflection."

Someone whistled long and low in the background. Will blinked. The Chief blinked back.

"I think it's all part of his design," he added lamely, wanting suddenly to soften the blow with which he had delivered his analysis. There was no reason to be so certain. Nothing beyond a feeling that he was imbued with when he arranged the evidence just so in his head, and strung his own red string in the form of the sharp, static path between neurons.

“That what you think, Graham?” The Chief responded, eyes narrowed, one brow raised. “Kid,” he said, placing his hands on his hips and arching his back as his eyes shot between Will and the board. “You watch a lot of true crime or something?”

“A…bit,” Will half-lied.

Throughout his life he had both avoided and binged the genre; though thick, yellowing books with ugly covers more often provided him with his fix than did a TV. He had been drawn in at a young age, then promptly scared away. As a teen, angry and alone, it had sometimes been comforting to know that far more terrible things had happened to other people. Of course, Will’s conscience would shake him awake at night, with the screams of the innocent rattling around his skull and he would ban himself from the vicious vice until his hatred came a-knocking again. Sometimes it was just nice to see that where others had been driven to depravity by their social exclusion, Will had somehow managed to dismiss his darkest thoughts, the kind that he assured himself *everyone* had from time to time. Right now, for instance, as the Chief’s lips thinned and he began to shake his head – stubborn as an ox – Will imagined taking the handful of wispy hair left on his head and dashing his face against the corner of the nearest desk. Sturdy things, those desks. Screwed into the floor.

“Then explain the heart, Graham,” he said, with a small, smug smile – as if he and Will were opponents and not part of the same force.

For someone who loathed verbal confrontation, Will often found himself entangled in it.

“I…can’t,” he admitted quietly, twitching when the Chief huffed in response.

“Can’t,” the Chief parroted back at him, nodding slowly. “You know why, Graham?”

“Sir?” Will asked reluctantly, when it was clear he was expected to do so.

“Cos’ this isn’t some fancy Greek story. This is real-life, cold-blooded murder. God damn, I almost got pulled into your far-fetched fuckery. You’ve got a sick mind, Graham.”

“Yessir,” Will mumbled and allowed himself to be shouldered past. Someone snorted behind him and then everyone returned to their work as if nothing had transpired.

Later that evening, in the shower, Will cried.

A little later again, he thrust frustratedly into his own hand and man who took him into his mouth in his mind, usually so shadowy and obscure, took on the dark eyes and sharp edges of Hannibal.

-

It was strange to see the student doctor standing outside of his unit that evening, uncanny in every way apart from the lack of Will’s cock in his mouth. He’d not felt terribly guilty in the wake of his release; everyone thought weird things while they touched themselves. Now though, with Hannibal dipping his head in polite greeting as Will stepped from the car, it was difficult not to feel at least a little dirty. He cleared his throat by way of awkward greeting

and thrust his hands into his jacket pockets so the other couldn't see his fingers twitching. Hannibal, he realised – although given everything that had transpired in his apartment he supposed he couldn't have only *just now* been realising it, was actually quite attractive. It wasn't in a generic way, which may explain Will's consciousness flagging behind his cock on the uptake. He didn't have symmetry, a wide jaw or full lips – wasn't bestowed with anything as mundane as that. It was the sculpted cheekbones and deep-set almond eyes that Will noticed, as if for the first time. Hannibal cut a sharp but elegant silhouette against the rusted exterior of the unit. He was as young as Will and had no right to appear so conversely youthful and distinguished at once.

"Hey," Will mumbled, and as he approached his workshop and began fumbling for his keys.

"Will," Hannibal said in reply, as if that were just as casual a greeting.

It wasn't. The named dripped from his lips like molasses.

Will already had his key in the padlock and was so very nearly in the clear when Hannibal spoke behind him, closer than he had been only a moment before.

"Any luck with your killer?"

Practically bent in half only inches from the man behind him, Will felt his cheeks flush. He stumbled a little when the door sprang up and his cheeks only burnt brighter when Hannibal reached out a hand to steady him at the waist.

"I, uh -yeah. Well, no." Will stuttered, turning and sliding as casually as possible from his grasp. "I think I'm onto something, but they still don't agree." He lifted his hand to rub the back of his neck and hoped his face wasn't as beet red as it felt.

From the answering tilt of Hannibal's lips as Will turned to face him, he assumed it was.

"Oh?" He prompted, after an uncomfortably long silence in which Hannibal gazed on placidly while Will's face flamed as hot as the sixth circle of Dante's inferno.

Will cleared his throat and shuffled back into the cavity of his unit because Hannibal was unsettlingly close and had left no leeway out on the gravel road for Will to escape into.

"I'm fairly certain of the origin of the killer's...artistry," he said, testing the word.

Hannibal's eyebrows pitched, though he didn't seem perturbed. Will assumed he was still morbidly curious. It was a relief to note that Hannibal's polished brogues didn't cross the boundary to his sacred space. They remained just on the precipice – enough of an invasion of Will's privacy to agitate, though not enough to be considered impolite.

"You're on track to catch him, then?" Hannibal asked, tilting his head.

Will let out a short, sharp sound that fell somewhere between a laugh and wail of distress.

"The very, very start of a track that's nearly impossible to navigate," he said, "and everyone ese has opted to wander aimlessly in the other direction."

Hannibal smiled.

“He’ll have to kill again,” Will sighed, “I need him to…*prove me right*...or I’ll be stuck in place and the rest of the force will be stranded in oblivion.”

There was a brief pause in the conversation. Will grimaced.

“You *need* him to kill again?” Hannibal repeated, and though Will felt his stomach turn in anticipation of the ensuing social rejection he felt sure was coming his way, Hannibal’s smile became only a little more muted rather than disintegrating into a lip curled in disgust.

“That’s sounds- I didn’t mean I *want* him to.”

“But you do *want* to catch him,” Hannibal replied calmly.

Will nodded and shuffled from foot to foot.

“And for that, he’d needs to kill again.”

Hannibal was challenging him. *Again*. No wonder Will had fantasised about stuffing his mouth full.

“He *will* kill again,” Will said with a resigned shrug, and then, with a sudden burst of confidence, “and I *will* catch him.”

With the last residue of the smile still lingering on his thin lips, Hannibal considered him for a moment before nodding once. Without a word, he took a large step back and then turned to disappear into his own unit. Will watched him go with his brow crumpled in confusion. For all that he and Hannibal were opposites, they had one thing in common; they were both unapologetically weird.

When he left, hours later, Hannibal was already gone. Will urged his car across the spitting gravel and exited the lot. The roads were dead; he could have been the only living person on the planet. Just as he began to turn from the side road onto the highway, his car juddered to a stop and he had to apply the brakes to stop himself rolling slowly out into oncoming traffic. With a muttered curse, he climbed from the car and circled round the bonnet the check the engine. He had only just clocked the smell of petrol when headlights appeared around the corner and the car they belonged to began to slow. Despite trying to wave the driver on, Will would rather deal with this issue alone, the car came to a stop right behind his own.

“It’s fine, I’ve got this!” Will called, squinting into the high beams.

It was impossible to see the driver, even as they stepped form their vehicle and began to walk in a purposeful fashion, straight for Will.

Chapter End Notes

It's 4.29am, so if this is sucky and full of typos I apologise but I've quite my job and am slowly spiraling into a nice, fresh bout of depression and this is the best I can do right now.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As the silhouette drifted towards him – backlit ankles disappearing into the slick, black surface of the road – Will swallowed and squared his shoulders. He felt suddenly threatened, not just by the shadow with a predator's gait, but by the darkness all around him. The sideroad was hemmed in by thick trees and weeds, and he was just as likely to die fleeing through a tangle of thorns and gnarled tree roots as he was should he stumble out of the junction and into the unending stream of merging cars. Perhaps, he bitterly mused, all that time spent analysing the body on the bridge had taken its toll.

"It's fine," he tried again, motioning to the exposed engine, but the dark spectre was on him then and its sharp features came into focus.

"Engine trouble?" Hannibal asked, and then with his eyes crinkling slightly at the corners; "Shame you're not a mechanic."

Blinking mutely at the last person he had expected to see on this stretch of road, it took Will a moment to pick up on the quip.

"I don't think so, actually," he huffed, relief palpable, and rounded the car to crouch by the fuel tank.

Sure enough, fuel was dripping sluggishly from the underside to be lapped up by the frayed hem of his jeans. Will grimaced and then looked askance to Hannibal – who was looming calmly over him.

"You left before me," Will said, still crouched, propped with one hand at the bumper of his car.

It wasn't exactly a challenge, though it wasn't a mere statement of fact either. Will's eyes were narrowed, a vestige of his earlier fear returned to him. Hannibal nodded pleasantly at the accusation.

"I did," he agreed, "As luck would have it, I had some errands to attend to in the area."

"Hmm, I don't feel particularly lucky," Will grumbled, dropping lower still and trying to crane his neck at the right angle to see the damage.

A firm hand on his shoulder thwarted his progress though, Hannibal bending over him with an admonishing frown. Despite his aversion to touch, Will would tumble onto his ass if he tried to shuck his hand away, so he paused where he was and cleared his throat. Hannibal did not take this as a cue to step away, but rather to come closer -so close that the tips of his dress shoes breached the fuel puddle that Will was huddled in – and haul Will to his feet. Only then

could he edge away with some semblance of dignity. Hannibal was watching him with that familiar, infuriating bemusement lighting his eyes.

“Perhaps the luck is mine,” he suggested, and Will stared back at him, trying to silently pick that apart until another car rumbled past them and pulled him out of his own head.

He turned to it absentmindedly, but Hannibal’s voice pulled him back.

“Will,” Hannibal was stalking back to his car, coat tails flapping with each stride, “please, allow me to take you home.”

Will glanced uncertainly at the sleek black car as Hannibal opened the passenger side door.

“My car-“ he protested, sure he would feel distinctly uncomfortable on butter-soft leather seats of Hannibal’s extortionate vehicle.

“To my apartment, then,” Hannibal amended, “so you can use the phone.”

“I don’t need charity,” he bit out, and then instantly realised that he had put himself at a disadvantage by suggesting such a dynamic existed between them. He frowned.

“No need to look so grim,” Hannibal said, still waiting expectantly by his own vehicle, “I promise I’m not a particularly generous person. This isn’t charity.”

He was drenched in shadows, and Will couldn’t read his expression to deduce whether or not that should be taken as a joke - not that Hannibal’s face ever seemed to give much away. It dawned on Will that there was no polite way to turn Hannibal’s offer down, especially when the sky laughed thunderously at him and began to spit rain, so he pocketed his keys and joined Hannibal at the Bentley, wincing as his damp, oil-stained clothes made contact with the elegant interior.

“Sorry,” he muttered, with a vague gesture to his state of dress.

Hannibal’s dark eyes scanned the length of his body and then crinkled again.

“You have nothing to apologise for,” he said, and pulled away.

The drive was not filled with the awkward silence that Will had expected, nor the barbed words or trading in metaphors that Will had become accustomed to with Hannibal. Altogether, the journey was not nearly as uncomfortable as Will had assumed it would be. Something classical drifted from the stereo and Hannibal graciously accepted Will’s belated gratitude for the lift and then congenially described his living arrangements.

“So, are we headed for Tulane accommodation?” Will asked, expecting the answer he received.

“I’m renting an apartment in the Upper Garden District,” Hannibal explained, “just while I study.”

Will nodded sagely. Uptown was far removed from the part of town in which Will resided, and farther still from the rickety creole shack he still thought of as home. His throat clicked as he swallowed, pre-empting the discomfort he would feel once he was trapped in another's space.

"I won't take up much of your time," he said, and watched through the window as the long dark road and distant streetlights gave way to the dull glow from the lintelled windows of townhouses draped in Spanish moss.

If the Warehouse district, where Will resided, was the epitome of lower-class living then the Upper Garden district reeked of wealth. Will frowned and sank a little further into himself with every fluted pillar and gaping arched window.

"It's all rather splendid, isn't it?" Hannibal asked, giving Will the distinct feeling of being watched even while his dark eyes were glued to the road ahead of them.

Could he sense Will recoiling at the very sight of such splendour? Did his hunched posture scream poverty? He nodded in response, not trusting himself to respond in a way that wasn't biting.

"I'm not one for the sprawling porches of Greek revivals," Hannibal said nonchalantly, as though that were a choice that everyone had the opportunity to turn down. "I rent the top two floors of an entresol at the edge of the district," he went on, "The night-blooming jasmine smothers everything there. I appreciate a flower that doesn't shy from darkness."

"You keep late hours," Will huffed, "it's nice to have some company."

He thought of the black maw of the swamp at night; how the abyss welcomed him home when he'd sleepwalk and wind up knee-deep in it. The drooping branches, the dark shacks; everything seemed dead or sleeping but the swamp. He could imagine the comfort Hannibal found in coming home to the open faces of flowers; their petals bright white in the moonlight.

"The illusion of having been missed," Hannibal agreed, and though the words were forlorn on their own, he sounded pleased.

Will studied his profile and felt the words cut him regardless.

They turned then, and Will caught sight of the jasmine and the peaked roofs of the towering houses that lined the streets. Things were darker here, older; from the swirling, wrought-iron balconies to the heavy black shutters and trim. They slowed and submerged themselves momentarily in the shadows of a carriageway, emerging in a paved courtyard lined with cars.

"Home sweet home?" Will asked.

"Not quite," Hannibal said, more sombre than before, "I've not been home in a long time."

Once inside, Hannibal took Will's coat and hung it on the varnished coat-stand alongside his own, as if it were of equal value. It looked as out of place there as Will felt. Other people's

spaces were oppressive; they had their own smell and the temperature was never quite right. Hannibal's apartment smelt herbaceous and the heat hit Will like a wall. Hannibal stood and watched him for a moment, as if expecting him to take the time to properly appreciate the grandeur when all Will was really thinking was whether or not he should remove his shoes. Those were the sorts of social graces that Will struggled with and while he was an expert at following the unspoken cues of others, Hannibal gave very little to work with. Will itched to be in his own space, where the smell had become undetectable in its familiarity and he had become accustomed to the chill.

After a moment, perhaps once he was satisfied that Will had properly taken in his surroundings, Hannibal moved them past the heavily adorned walls of a narrow hall and into a study of sorts. It was the type of room that Will imagined women had been allowed to flitter into with trays of drink while not being permitted to stay – at least, when it had first been built.

"What are you thinking, Will?" Hannibal asked, taking a seat in a deep, leather chair by the unlit fire and motioning for Will to do the same.

"That this room is very masculine," he answered honestly, aware that it was a bizarre thing to say.

Hannibal dipped his head and agreed; "Not just the room. I should think you'd find much of the apartment the same. I live alone."

Will nodded absently as he sat, perusing the shelves around them. Rows of hardbacks were interspersed with antiques and oddities; a taxidermied hare with a blank stare, a mahogany bracket clock, and the mounted skull of something small and sharp. He rubbed the back of his neck and, when Hannibal clocked the movement as he had before, twisted his hands in his lap, picking absently at the edges of the healing, raised burn across his knuckles.

"Your phone?" He asked, wincing at how thankless he sounded.

"I'll show you the way in just a moment," Hannibal answered, "but it would be remiss of me not to check that things are healing properly while I have the opportunity."

He held out his hand expectantly and Will obliged him, if only to move things along so that he could phone his breakdown provider and then get a taxi home.

With a firm hold on his wrist, Hannibal turned Will's hand this way and that and looked it over with such scrutiny that the hand began to sweat and Will yanked it back to wipe along his trouser leg.

"It's fine," he insisted.

"Of course," Hannibal agreed, though rather than being in agreement, he seemed mostly to be humouring Will. "I'll bring the phone through now. I don't keep it connected as I find it simpler to make most calls from the hospital – they usually pertain to work."

Will nodded and then exhaled when Hannibal disappeared through the doorway. While he was glad to be free of Hannibal's prying nature for a few minutes, the study was not a welcoming place to be left alone. The stuffed hare's beady gaze did not let up, and the clock seemed to be tutting at him with each passing second. He stood and made his way to the window, glad that the heavy drapes were not drawn so that he could look out across the street while he waited. Magnolias and oak tress kept the jasmine company; it was all very pretty and Will felt himself relax minutely. It didn't stop him from flinching when Hannibal's voice sounded suddenly from within the room behind him.

"I took the liberty of preparing a light snack," he said, with the phone tucked under one arm and a tray of hors d'œuvres balanced on the opposite hand.

He placed both down on the coffee table but, much to Will's dismay, did not connect the phone.

"These look nice," he forced himself to say, peeling his eyes from the phone to pluck an intricate bite and bring it to his lips.

"Perhaps one day I will cook for you properly," Hannibal suggested, mirroring Will and savouring the snack with closed eyes.

"We're not friends," Will said, bluntly.

Hannibal swallowed and smiled.

"No," he agreed, "though who's to say it will stay that way?"

With no response prepared, Will opted to take another decorative morsel from the tray.

"Maple roasted turkey with leek and grated cashew," Hannibal supplied, blinking when Will coughed and dropped the half-eaten hors d'œuvre unceremoniously onto the tray.

"God, sorry," Will grimaced, "I should've asked."

"Will?"

"I'm allergic to tree nuts," Will explained, with a strangled laugh "*mildly*," he quickly added when Hannibal made to stand. "It's nothing to worry about beyond an upset stomach. It was delicious though."

"Allow me to get you a drink-"

"No, please," Will insisted, gripping his knees, "just the phone. I should get out of your hair."

Despite a pregnant pause, and much to Will's relief, Hannibal obliged him and hooked the phone up at his desk. He left Will to make his calls - removing himself, along with the offending tray, to the kitchen.

Will soon discovered it might have been prudent to acknowledge the clock's earlier tutting. It was far later than he had realised, well past midnight, and nobody was particularly happy to

help him in his predicament. Even taxis were few and far between, and none of those able to collect him within the hour.

“You look troubled,” Hannibal acknowledged from the doorway, as Will placed the phone down with a *thunk*.

He had removed his jacket and vest and rolled the sleeves of his shirt up to his elbow. It made him look younger, more his age.

“You probably want to turn in for the night,” Will acknowledged.

“That’s not an answer to my question,” Hannibal said, still blocking the exit.

“It was more of an observation than a question,” Will muttered, then dragged his hand harshly from his hairline to his chin. “Sorry. I can’t get a cab for another hour, but I can wait outside.”

“What kind of host would that make me?” Hannibal admonished, “I’m sure we kind find some way to pass the time.”

Will stayed rooted the spot - still smelling of fuel and uncomfortably aware that his boots had dirtied the oriental rug beneath his feet - as Hannibal made his way to a drink cabinet to pour something rich and dark from an unmarked bottle into two snifters. He moved as though every step and each twist of his wrist was a performance; poised and practiced; as alluring as it was unnatural. He was subtly high-handed, Will realised. How else could he have shepherded someone as awkward and introverted as Will into his playing field? He had used his courtesy as a weapon and now Will was at his mercy; trapped into returning his civility.

Only, Will had never been a very polite person.

“Why do you really want me to stay?” He asked flatly, even as he accepted the snifter and took a sip.

Hannibal was not an expert at hiding his surprise, though Will could tell he practiced at it. One day, his hesitation would be undetectable. As for right now, his affected smile stayed firmly on his face but some of the arrogance left his eyes.

“As I said before, it isn’t charity,” Hannibal replied, regaining enough composure to guide them both to their previous seats.

He held his snifter beneath his nose and inhaled, then placed it on the coffee table without taking a sip. Will did the opposite, taking a generous swig.

“I‘ve found myself enjoying your reluctant acceptance of my presence,” Hannibal smiled, “I had thought you might try to chase me out of my unit, when we first met.”

Will huffed a laugh.

“I considered it,” he admitted. “Still might.” He softened his words with an uncomfortable smile of his own.

Hannibal dipped his head and crossed one leg over the other.

“Forgive me for saying this, Will, but you strike me as rather- mulish.” He said, slowly, as if testing the word on his tongue.

Will barked a laugh at that, startled by the bluntness.

“Why do you let your colleagues disregard and direct you like-“

“-a mule?” Will cut in, with raised brows.

Hannibal’s answering laugh was more honest than those Will had heard before. He lifted his glass again and then paused in thought, with the rim hovering just below his pert lips.

“I may be just a layman,” he said, “but your insight seems sharp enough to cut. Perhaps they should take you more seriously.”

Will finished his drink to avoid having to formulate a response and felt suddenly very tired. It was not just his usual numbness, but rather a genuine, heavy-lidded exhaustion to threatened to topple him over into unconsciousness there and then. He tried and failed to stifle a yawn and sensed Hannibal watching him in his periphery.

“S’been a long day,” he mumbled, rubbing his eyes. ”Bathroom?”

It was hardly a fully formed request, but Hannibal seemed unphased and guided him up a set of stairs, through a neatly appointed bedroom, and into an ensuite. The bathroom was stark black and white and brightly lit, though everything seemed a little soft around the edges. With a shuddering exhale, Will splashed cold water onto his face and then blinked at his slack expression in the mirror. Everything seemed to have caught up with him; the early morning, the dressing down at work, a breakdown in the shower followed by a sad wank, bumping into the subject of said wank shortly thereafter, becoming stranded in the middle of the night, eating cashews, getting trapped with Hannibal in his study. It was no wonder he could barely stay standing.

When he walked sluggishly back into the adjoining bedroom, Hannibal was stood at the foot of the bed with a concerned expression. It was darker than he had left it, lit only by the bedside lamp. It cast everything, Hannibal included, in long, looming shadows.

“Perhaps it would be wise to spend what’s left of the night here,” he suggested, “It’s nearly morning and the taxi is still a half hour away. I can deal with it when it arrives.”

Will shook his head and the room span. He pinched his temples and when he removed his hand from across his eyes, Hannibal was turning down the corner of the duvet as if it had already been decided. The sheet looked crisp and clean and welcoming. If Will were to sink into the bed, he knew there would be no patch of mould staring down at him from the ceiling. He took a step toward it, even as he shook his head again.

There were definitely reasons *not* to spend the night under the roof of a near-stranger, though they escaped Will in that moment. He thought of his own squeaking bedsprings, thin walls

and loud neighbours and took another step closer.

“I’m still a mess,” he reasoned, “the fuel- I should get back to shower.”

“Nonsense,” Hannibal tutted and motioned to the ensuite, “There’s a shower right behind you, and fresh towels. Please Will, I insist.”

And once again, Hannibal had cornered him with courtesy and left no route of escape – not that Will, with his bone-deep exhaustion, was particularly driven to refuse the offer when he thought of the lukewarm shower and old, yellowed mattress awaiting him in his own apartment.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t worry, Hannibal’s just being chivalrous. It’s not like he’s drugged Will so that he can take that taxi back to his apartment to pinpoint things he can use against him…oh, wait.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Will accepted the offer with hesitancy and jumbled words, though Hannibal seemed to take it in his stride - placing folded sleep clothes at the foot of the bed before taking his leave. With a furrowed brow, Will sat to collect himself before hoisting his aching body onto its feet and stumbling back into the bathroom. The hot shower was bliss, even if Will had to steady himself against the slick wall to stop himself from falling. He tilted his face to the spray and sighed – felt his muscles uncoil like the fronds of a fern. The shame he felt at accepting Hannibal's hospitality washed right off of him and disappeared down the drain.

He had barely stepped from the shower – not yet had the chance to even reach for a towel – before his stomach lurched and he was careening across the wet floor towards the toilet. He hunched over the bowl, grimacing as his knees made contact with the hard tile, and emptied his stomach. It took a while – it always did when he mistakenly consumed cashews and the like – and by the time he was finished he was trembling naked on the floor; throat burning and eyelids mapped with burst veins. Belatedly, he wrapped his waist with a towel, though it did little to warm him, and caught his breath. The whole experience had shaken him, at least a little, from his earlier stupor. He was still bone-tired though, so he made quick work of brushing his teeth and stepped out into the bedroom.

For a moment, he worried that Hannibal had been privy to his vomiting, but then he heard the mellifluous sound of water running in the room next door. He was fairly certain that Hannibal, with his soft hands and tidy hair, was the type of person to take long, leisurely showers so he felt safe in the assumption that he had suffered his indignity alone. He slipped between the thick bedsheets, switched off the lamp, and sank into sleep in a matter of seconds.

Having had a transient childhood, it did not immediately strike Will as odd to wake up in a room that was not his own. It did however take a few foggy moments to recall how he had ended up on such a comfortable bed, wrapped in lavishly soft blankets. He had slept almost free from nightmares – except from the brief and bleary dream of something slinking into the room and clicking its fingers above his face – and felt cool and calm in contrast to the sweaty mess he normally greeted in the mirror each morning. Of course, it wasn't quite morning yet – a slither of moonlight cutting through the gap in the curtains to spill across the foot of the bed. Will considered turning his back on it and drifting back to sleep, but his throat felt raw and the sour taste of vomit lingered on his tongue. He opted to get himself a glass of water instead; assuming that having been so courteous already, Hannibal would hardly mind.

The apartment was bigger than his own, but not so vast that he couldn't navigate it in the dark – and the last thing he wanted to do was wake his host with the click of a switch or the intrusion of the hallway light slipping under his door. There was a hyper alertness to Hannibal – evident in the sharpness of his eyes and his swift reactions – that made Will suspect he was a light sleeper. He paused at the archway leading into the kitchen and listened,

but there was no sign that Hannibal had stirred. The kitchen was bigger than the guest room and the study combined, and had large, arching windows that looked out directly on the night-blooming jasmine. Wisps of ivy encroached on the view and, illuminated by the streetlights, cast winding shadows on the far wall. It was beautiful, but the itchy sense of unease that came with being in other people's spaces had returned to Will now that he was fully conscious, and he wished he could click his fingers – or perhaps clack his heels together - and be back in his own apartment; dismal though it may be.

The cupboard space, like most things pertaining to Hannibal, was superfluous but Will eventually found a glass and filled it at the sink. The water in the garden district was softer that he was used to, and he guzzled a second glass before his stomach gave a warbled protest. As he drank, he scanned his surroundings and felt with absolute certainty that he was standing in the heart of Hannibal's home. A large cast iron skillet, granite frying pan and sleek, black wok hung suspended above the island. The sink was empty and gleaming, and the counters were precisely appointed with all manner of appliances – none of them without a certain aesthetic appeal. Will felt that he was intruding. He placed the glass down and started to step in the direction of the hallway, when the front door clicked gently from around the corner, followed by a whisper of fabric as someone slipped quietly from their coat. Will froze in the shadows and wondered if Hannibal had been lying when he had told him he lived alone.

He winced as footsteps neared the kitchen entrance, already dreading the thought of having to introduce and explain himself. The hall was without access to the moonlight that bathed the kitchen, and whomever had entered neglected to switch the light on, so as a tall silhouette passed the archway, Will was not immediately aware that it was Hannibal himself – at least, not until he paused and tilted his head in that familiar, feline way of his.

"Will," he said, turning on his heel to acknowledge him. He stepped forward, so that the moonlight glanced from one side of his sculpted face, and scanned Will with expressionless eyes.

Will's curse was that his mouth often let loose words that his mind had not yet had a chance to filter and so, though he had intended to apologise for skulking around Hannibal's home at night he instead said;

"Why were you out in the middle of the night?" and then grimaced and ducked his head.

Rather that take immediate offence, Hannibal maintained a sort of blankness and let a moment of silence pass between them; perhaps to formulate a response though more likely to let Will stew in silence as a sort of punishment for his bluntness.

"I often take a walk in the early hours of the morning," he said, still filling the exit so that Will had no choice but to withstand the full social encounter.

There was a muted, metallic jangle as Hannibal slid something from his trouser pocket to place it on the sideboard just out of Will's line of sight.

Will swallowed and nodded, went to rub the back of his neck but stopped when Hannibal's eyes tracked the movement as they always did.

“You often leave strangers with full access to your home in the middle of the night?” he asked, and cursed himself because, if he had just let it go, he might have been halfway up the stairs by now.

Hannibal smiled then but still it did not reach his eyes.

“Not often, no. As I mentioned, I am not particularly charitable. However, while I am a creature of habit, I am not so selfish that I would have woken you and turned you out onto the street in the night so that I could enjoy my walk in the knowledge that my apartment was unoccupied.”

Will wrung his hands and looked anywhere but Hannibal’s guarded expression.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, and shifted foot to foot while he waited for Hannibal to step aside and free him from this torment.

He did not.

“What time is it?” Will asked, wondering if it was a reasonable enough hour to leave.

“Still late,” Hannibal supplied. “Go back to bed, Will.”

Will huffed at the authoritative tone, but it was the escape he had wanted so he ducked his head and sidestepped past Hannibal who made no attempt to allow him any personal space on his way past. He felt eyes boring into his back as he ascended, but he didn’t turn to meet them, even if he itched to.

Will felt, for reasons he was not yet ready to acknowledge, that he did not want to go back to sleep while under the same roof as his host. Unfortunately for him, traces of his earlier weariness remained, and his resolve was not so strong as his body’s need for rest. He startled awake some time later, still propped up against the headboard.

It was light outside – a bad sign – and his clothes were crumpled and still reeked of gasoline. He winced as he put them on and then cussed as he misbuttoned his shirt twice before opting to just leave it hanging open to save time. Stumbling down the stairs, with his briefs inside out and his old socks curled up in the pocket of his jeans, Will hoped Hannibal had yet to wake – a hope that was dashed by the sounds of him busying himself in the kitchen.

“Good morning,” he called, before Will had even reached the entrance.

Hannibal’s voice was thick with sleep, yet somehow pleasant and smooth.

“Morning,” Will responded, his own voice hoarse.

He started to button his shirt, but it was too little too late. Hannibal rounded the corner and stopped, with raised brows, in the hall. He was dressed again in an outrageously busy three-piece suit, brogues on and hair styled.

“I can get you something to wear,” he offered, but Will waved him off.

“I need to change into my uniform before work anyway. Do you mind if I call that cab now?”

He brushed past Hannibal, shoulders hunched and face burning with shame, to force his bare feet into his boots by the door.

“Thanks for letting me stay,” he added, belatedly. He patted his pockets but could not find his keys.

“Allow me to at least make you breakfast while you wait,” Hannibal offered in return, but Will was shaking his head even before he had finished speaking.

He spotted his keys then, in a marbled bowl on the sideboard.

“I’m already going to be late for work, but thanks,” he said, scooping them up.

“In that case,” Hannibal said decisively, striding down the hall, “I had better drive you. It will be much quicker.”

Much like the night before, but with even more floundering on Will’s part, Hannibal forced him to take him up on an offer he would rather not have received. Will felt himself shrink in his seat as Hannibal glided into the parking lot of his worn and industrial apartment complex. That same baby was wailing again, but at least his neighbours weren’t screaming profanities as he and Hannibal traversed the scuffed, brown carpet of the narrow hallway that lead to his door.

“Um, you can sit,” Will mumbled, noting the pile of unwashed bowls in his sink a moment too late.

He couldn’t help but feel a disgruntled kind of gratitude towards Hannibal, even while brimming with the unease caused by having him in his space. While not outwardly or purposefully pompous, he certainly looked incongruous in his eclectic formalwear, surrounded by cracked porcelain and faded wallpaper. Will wanted to be able to offer something better, and his own inadequacy made him dislike Hannibal a little more.

Hannibal didn’t notice, or else pretended he had not, and made himself at home on one of two rickety chairs in the kitchen – folding one leg over the other and continuing to look outrageously misplaced in the dim, damp little space. Will hesitated and looked at the frame of his glasses as he spoke.

“You really don’t need to drive me to the station, I can take it from here.”

Hannibal leant forward on his chair, so that he was firmly back in Will’s line of sight, and motioned to his bedroom door.

“Please, Will. Go and get dressed.”

And so, despite his raised hackles at being commanded again, Will did as he was told and hurried into his uniform – Hannibal’s intentions as much a mystery as they had been the night before. If Will was not a charity case, then what? A project? A fixer-upper friend? His mind, very often working against him, chose that moment to reconjure the image of an imaginary

Hannibal on his knees with Will's cock deep in his throat. It was too depressingly implausible to entertain the notion that Hannibal might be attracted to him. That thought had Will considering the possibility that Hannibal might be doing all of this for sport – watching a backwater boy in blue stumbling over himself, reduced to utter incapability within Hannibal's sphere of wisdom and wealth.

With all of that still pummelling the inside of his head, Will exited his room with narrowed eyes. He wanted to ask *why* again, but knew it would lead to more deflection on Hannibal's part, so instead announced that he was ready to be chauffeured to work – if not in so many words.

As the sleek car ambled to a stop alongside the entrance to the station, Will hunched in on himself. Bates and Myers were on the sidewalk and the Chief was smoking his customary cigar in the doorway. All eyes landed on Will as he forced himself to unfurl from the passenger seat and exit the vehicle. Will was reminded, suddenly and quite uncomfortably, of his first day of school in New Orleans; dropped off by a woman that was very obviously his social worker. Being the new kid – again – was awful enough but his stomach had lurched when he looked up and realised that everyone *knew* he was a welfare kid. This time, he did not make the mistake of meeting anyone's eyes.

"I hope you feel closer to your killer today, Will." Hannibal said, a perfectly pleasant smile on his face.

"To catching him, you mean," Will mumbled absently in return, reaching into the footwell to get his things.

"Of course," Hannibal replied, leaning around him to wave amicably at the Chief. "It's only a matter of time."

Chapter End Notes

> This chapter has been a pain in the ass, if I'm honest. After FOUR MONTHS of trying to make it longer/better/more descriptive/less descriptive/more plot driven blah de blah de blah... I have given up and posted it.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The slats of the louvered window next to Will's desk were covered in a fine layer of dust. Instead of black, this made them the same miserable shade of grey as the rest of the station's interior; ugly grey carpet, ugly grey ceiling, ugly grey desks and computers. Will sighed and some of the dust caught on his breath and scattered. There had been no developments in the case, and he had been relegated to his desk should anyone enter the station in need of immediate help. He had been staring through the slats for the better part of three hours; willing a purse-less old woman or badly beaten homeless man to stumble past him and through the station doors.

Will had watched over the top of his glasses, with a mix of irritation and disbelief, as the victim's ex-lovers were brought in one by one for more questioning; a menagerie of mild mannered, manicured women who all seemed suitably sombre though not particularly affected by the news of Roux's passing. Certainly not emotionally invested enough to have killed him themselves. Next, was a slurry of the victim's friends and then colleagues – the Chief looking more and more dejected at the end of each interview.

The day stretched uselessly on and, if not for the fact that he was unusually well-rested thanks to Hannibal's luxuriously appointed guest bedroom, Will would have already been five coffees deep and twitching restlessly in his ugly, grey chair. As it was, he was simply *bored*. A little sour to have had all of his theories knocked down, but mostly, painfully *bored*. He wondered what Hannibal was doing at that moment. Dissecting a vital organ, taking blood, learning how to break bones back into place; something infinitely more important and exciting than what Will was doing, that was certain. To think he had been proud when he first made the force.

His watch buzzed to let him know it was time for his lunch break, and his stomach responded. Having not taken Hannibal up on the offer for breakfast, and having emptied his stomach repeatedly the night before, Will was ravenous – even if he was only just now realising it. He normally would have packed something carb heavy and half-stale, but he had been rushing that morning; and wouldn't have wanted to throw together a meal of cold pizza and day-old pasta under the weight of Hannibal's judgmental gaze. Really, he found it hard not to judge himself. He had never eaten so poorly when his dad was alive; when they had shared their little rickety, water-logged home and had feasted on crawdads with grilled corn and peppers. There had been sunlight then, and clean air, and the vegetables had been easy enough to grow in large wooden planters on their porch. Now, with the tendency to avoid other people, Will did not often visit a grocery store and as a consequence dined mostly on food that could be ordered over the phone and left outside the door of his apartment. There were no catfish or striped bass living in the puddles outside of his apartment block, and no garden or balcony on which Will could grow his own veg.

Feeling homesick for a place that no longer belonged to him, Will abandoned his post to scout the quarter for a quiet spot to eat. As he was leaving, he bumped shoulders with one of Roux's colleagues – a stout, bald man in a brown suit. Definitely not reeking of the type of unique inspiration it would take to leave a body, draped in velvet and absent a heart, languishing across a bridge. Just a normal bank teller, a few ranks below Roux by the looks of it. Perhaps the Chief was changing his angle; a crime of envy rather than passion. Will supressed an eyeroll and was relieved to leave the station behind him for an hour.

He thought on it a little more though, as he walked with his head down and shoulders hunched, and while he remained steadfastly assured that the shiny-headed man was innocent - and that Roux was not killed by someone who envied his position – there was some merit in investigating his place of work. It all tied into the theme, the one screaming at the officers and going ignored, that Roux was a narcissist and a materialist. Had he taken money that wasn't his? Looked down on someone who could only afford to withdraw so much? Denied a loan simply for a power trip? Someone certainly thought poorly of him and though the Chief did not know *what to see*, he seemed to be getting warmer in terms of *where to look.*

It was for that reason alone that Will chose to eat in an internet café. It was not his usual scene, being far too busy for his liking, and it served a very limited menu, but Will's appetite had suddenly been replaced with a hunger for knowledge. He ordered a coffee and bagel and claimed the computer furthest from anyone else. The machine buzzed to life, and Will felt something stir in himself in response. Strictly speaking, he was off the clock, but he was finally doing something in line with what he had imagined when he first set his sights on a future in law enforcement.

The bank where Roux worked had a geometric and vaguely patriotic symbol; a red and blue bird formed from several triangles, with the bank's name in bold font below it. It offered everything from student accounts to the protection of the sort of mind-boggling sums that came with a VIP pass and solid black card. That did not help narrow down the pool of possible perps – nor did the fact that it might not have been a customer at all. Roux could have offended somebody anywhere, but Will decided to stay on his current track because it was the only thing he could do with his time that actually felt of any use. There were more than a hundred branches across the US, two of them located in New Orleans. Will had not actually been informed of which branch employed Roux. He was, for all intents and purposes, off the case – even if it was being treated as a 'team effort' by the rest of the force.

Despite them all, he pulled his dog-eared notebook from his bag and jotted down some notes.

Narcissism – work with wealthy clients? abusing position of power? classist? self-interest = infuriatingly bad at job?

Missing Heart – ~~doesn't have one? unkind?~~ loves himself too much?

And then, because he still had five minutes before he had to leave, he scratched out a wobbly rendition of the bank's logo alongside his scribbles.

His shift was almost over when he got the call that his car was ready to be picked up. He caught the bus a few blocks from the station and tried to make himself comfortable among the throng of commuters and amidst the vague smell of piss. Claustrophobia got the best of

him though and, when the bus ambled to a stop outside of the public library, Will shoved his way to freedom – shuddering retrospectively at all of the shoulders he had brushed past on his way out.

The library was a veritable haven by contrast; high ceilings, tall, arching windows and a floor of vintage, tiled swirls that drew a susurrus of gentle, muffled clicks and clacks from the shoes of those passing by. Shelves lined every wall as well as the majority of a mezzanine that stood proud atop four thick, marble pillars. The musty smell of well-read books calmed Will in increments so that he was feeling suitably tranquil by the time he reached the shelves dedicated to mythology and legend. A particularly heavy tome on Greek myths stood out to him, but Will grabbed *Nordic Heroes*, *Hindu Mythology, The Legends of Asia* and *Slavic Folklore* just to be safe. There had only been one murder, and so no pattern to guide Will's investigation, but he fully anticipated a *theme.* One didn't just abandon the chilling sort of flare and finesse exhibited in this killer's debut. Will braved the second half of the bus route, bag weighed down by heavy books, and was tense and forwning once more when he reached the garage to find that the cause of his car troubles was a wrecked fuel tank.

"You been trying to take it off-road or something?" The greying mechanic grumbled as Will handed him a regretfully large fistful of dollar bills.

"No," Will said plainly, brow furrowed.

"Hmph," the older man replied, as if he didn't fully believe him.

"What?" Will pushed, feeling twitchy.

"It's just, something big enough and sharp enough to tear that hole in your fuel tank? You'd have seen it sticking up from a flat road."

Will yanked his glasses from his face and wiped them with his shirt sleeve.

"I drive a lot of night," he muttered, before sliding them back up along the bridge of his nose.

It was only natural for Will to drive straight to the sanctity of his unit, after that.

When he got there, Hannibal was already tucked away in his unit, his car waiting for him just outside. Will huffed, but felt very little animosity; the eccentric student doctor was becoming a familiar presence. Will liked routine and familiarity as much as he hated it. Comforting, but mundane. What he needed, though perhaps not what he wanted. Slamming his car door to announce himself, Will made his way over to his own unit. There was a cacophony of noise from behind Hannibal's rolling, metal door and it didn't stop to suggest that Will had been heard. He shrugged, reminding himself that he had gone out there to be alone. As was his habit, he kept the door to his unit open and unfolded the chair that was propped against the wall. He forwent a beer and instead settled, with the stars in his periphery, to flip through his pile of borrowed books.

The sounds from unit 304 were not the same *whir* and *grind* that Will had had to grow accustomed to. Tonight, Hannibal was *cracking* something. The sound was loud enough from

where Will sat, that it must have been ear-splitting to Hannibal himself. After the cracking, came banging – the sound of something heavy making contact with something solid – a loud but dull, fleshy thud – clay having the air beaten from it perhaps. It didn't sound measured and, for a moment, Will allowed himself to imagine Hannibal having a tantrum two units down; ushanka hurled to the side, hair mussed, feet stomping and lumbering clay sculptures being dashed against the concrete floor. He felt himself smile and shook his head, getting back to his book.

When Hannibal finally appeared some hours later, Will's pile of books was dwindling and it was clear that Hannibal had not been in the midst of an emotional outburst moments before. His hair was coiffed in his usual fashion, his suit garish but perfectly turned out. Will didn't see him leave his unit, merely heard the garage door roll upward in one, two, three short increments. Hannibal must have had to bend low to get out. He really was afraid of someone seeing his unfinished product.

"Light reading?" He asked, when he inevitably ended up stood at the threshold of Will's space.

His eyes danced over the book in his hands and then darted to the ones on the floor before trying to catch Will's line of sight.

"Anything is light reading after '*patterns of homicide related to intimate partner violence'*" Will responded flatly.

Hannibal managed to catch his eye briefly, but he quickly looked away, frowning.

"You've been swayed to your Chief's way of thinking, then?" Hannibal asked, folding his hands behind his back.

"No," Will laughed bitterly, "No. I've been set *homework*. He thought it best I read up on *real* crime and stopped…" Will grimaced and searched for the right word, "romanticising."

"I imagine killing is an intimate act," Hannibal mused, still respecting Will's space and keeping the tips of his polished dress shoes on the other side of the unit's threshold, "romance and intimacy go hand in hand."

Will huffed, pinched the bridge of his nose, and stood. He placed his book on top of the others and dragged a sturdy crate over next to the chair, taking a seat on it and motioning for Hannibal to make himself comfortable on the fold-out seat. Hannibal inclined his head in thanks and crossed the line, sitting close to Will.

"It wasn't romantic though, I just can't find the right word," Will admitted.

Hannibal leant towards him as if about to divulge a secret.

"Dramatizing, perhaps," he said, smoothly.

Will laughed; "The killer's the dramatic one. I'm just the guy pointing it out."

Hannibal smiled wide.

“Your killer is dramatic,” he said, “what else is he?”

“*My* killer,” Will parroted back, “He does feel like it. I’m the only one seeing his work for what it is, so it might as well all be for me.” Will’s lips parted to go on and then shut just as quickly. He shook his head. “It’s not though. I’m just the only one actually looking.”

He could hear the bitterness in his own voice, though Hannibal’s face remained perfectly pleasant, not at all put off by grim Graham’s abrasive personality.

“Maybe they are not gifted with your unique ability to truly *see,*” he mused.

“They’re not trying,” Will argued, running his palms harshly along the top of his thighs in irritation, “the photographs weren’t even taken from the right place.”

Hannibal seemed to sit even straighter, eyes flicking from Will’s awkward grip on his own knees to his scrunched face.

“I shouldn’t be talking about this with you,” Will said, meeting Hannibal’s eyes briefly but apologetically before flicking back to the rim of his glasses.

“I thought it might help to snowball some ideas,” Hannibal explained, waving a hand nonchalantly.

“I shouldn’t really discuss a case like this,” Will said with a breathy laugh, “I’ve never had a case like this to discuss. Or anyone to discuss it with.”

He grimaced, feeling pathetic to have admitted as much.

Hannibal smiled again, but smaller this time.

“Of course,” he said, reaching out to put a firm hand on Will’s shoulder.

He wanted to shuck it off and lean into it simultaneously. Prickly, but touch starved. The hand was gone a few seconds later, and Will blinked slowly and wondered why he ached to have it back.

“Sorry,” he said, suddenly. “-for not being the best company last night. And, thank you. I should have said that before.”

“You should have,” Hannibal agreed. His voice carried a lilt of humour, and the brash statement was enough to shock a laugh from Will.

“Though perhaps I should be the one apologising. I’m still honing the my skills in culinary art, but I’ve never before made someone sick.”

“Maybe check for nut allergies in the future,” Will said, “You wouldn’t want to kill someone.”

“Certainly not,” Hannibal agreed. “With you, at least, I know for next time.”

Will scoffed.

“Yeah, next time. I’m sure you can’t wait to get me in your guest bed again.”

He wilted a little in his chair, when he realised how that hod sounded.

“I was only proposing dinner, Will,” Hannibal said while standing smoothly and readjusting his suit, “though you’re more than welcome to stay the night.”

Will huffed, felt his cheeks burns, and shook his head – not able to trust that his voice would come out as anything other than a strangled squeal if he tried to respond with words.

“Just dinner, then,” Hannibal said with a nod, “You know where to find me.”

“You don’t have to-“ Will tried to say, but Hannibal went on as if he hadn’t been interrupted.

“I’ll see you Friday, Will. Seven P M sharp.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry, I know it's a bit slow. The next chapter is going to be brimming with murder and sexually charged dinner conversation, I promise.

Chapter 8

On Thursday morning, with the sun just cresting the waterfront, the second body was found – disembowelled and slumped against the base of a tree. For all that Will knew he should feel sickened by it, the sight of swirling entrails adorned with lotus flowers brought him some satisfaction. The macabre garlands were affirmation that his research into botany and mythology had not been a waste of time.

He had been brought out to bag and tag again, but then the FBI had descended upon them like a plague of highly-organised locusts and relegated the entire force to crowd control. Essentially, the New Orleans PD were there to form a human barrier around the crime scene while the agents did the real work. For Will, the disregard was a familiar feeling. The rest of the force however were more focussed on sneering at the officials than protecting the public from the sight of flowery intestines draped like vines through the branches of the tree.

“Fucking feds,” the Chief muttered, between puffs of his third cigar, though he looked pale and had given the body a wide berth as soon as permission had been granted.

Will was stood by the police tape like the rest of them, but close enough to smell the corpse. Fresh or not, bowels had no business being exposed to open air. He ducked his face into the collar of his shirt and put his arm out to discourage an overeager teenager with a disposable camera.

“This is a crime scene, get back!”

Will flinched, unaware that the stocky agent to whom the voice belonged had been so close behind him. He turned and accidentally met his severe glare head on, before shrinking back a little. His dark eyes brimmed with determination and single-minded purpose.

“Deputy, think you can pitch a tent?” He asked, authoritative but not overly derogatory.

“Yessir,” Will said with a terse nod, and followed him over to a collapsed forensic tent – making quick work of it.

There was a collective groan from the crowd as the body was obscured, but Will was closer than before and, with no one actively shooing him from the tent, elected to stand off to the side – out of everyone’s way – and get a good look.

The victim was another male, but older than the first – greying and with deep lines etched into his face that were not all born from dying in terror and pain. Will stared long and hard at the lotuses but could not think of any meaning that wasn’t linked to sex or fertility. It was immediately obvious that neither of those themes were intended.

The stench thickened inside the tent as the sun rose, but Will still felt a sense of loss to see the body bagged up. He wasn’t done yet and surely, if the chief was so reluctant to listen to him, he’d be met with even more disdain from the FBI. He shuffled out into the open a little mournfully to join the convoy back to the station.

“Grim,” the Chief barked as soon as they were through the door, clicking his fingers in the direction of the coffee machine.

For a second, the body at the base of the tree took on the Chief’s likeness in Will’s mind. He rubbed his temples and got started on the coffee. If the secretary hadn’t been repelled by the Chief’s overfamiliarity, Will might have been given some real policework to do. As it happened, he was tasked with parading tray after tray of cheap, black coffee into the Chief’s office – taking some small pleasure in the fact that the evidence board had been unceremoniously stripped and that the Chief looked more affronted each time Will returned to refill their mugs.

When he stopped for lunch, he pulled the library books from his satchel and spread them out across his desk. He had a niggling feeling that he had already stumbled upon the answer. He had read each book cover to cover but, despite having always had a strong memory, he couldn’t recall *every* story he had read. It was a dusty, dog-eared encyclopaedia of Greek mythology that most strongly drew his attention and he had just located the right page, when a meaty hand came to rest heavily beside it. Will startled and peered up through his glasses to find the same agent from the crime scene towering over him.

“What you got?” he asked, considering the page.

Will winced. A picture of a lotus flower sat in the middle of the double page spread. There was no way to pretend his reading material was unrelated to the murder.

“Just a-“ Will coughed when his voice came out croaky from disuse. “Just a theory.”

The agent’s eyes narrowed as he read and Will shuffled uncomfortably in his chair, feeling penned in.

“You think this could be the killer’s inspiration?”

Will shrank, preparing himself for more criticism.

“You need to come in,” he said instead, motioning for Will to follow him into the Chief’s office, “share this with the team.”

His tone brooked no argument, so Will shuffled after him, regretting it instantly when the Chief took one look at him and held his empty mug up expectantly.

“Officer-“ The agent stopped in his tracks and turned to Will expectantly.

“Graham,” Will mumbled, casting his eyes to the floor when the Chief’s started to bore into him.

“Officer Graham has something.”

Will tried to ignore the Chief’s snort. The agent swept a hand towards the evidence board, giving Will the floor.

He approached it with some trepidation, eyes frantically scanning the new array of evidence and red string so that he was up to date with what the FBI already knew by the time he took his place in front of them all. In sharp contrast to the Chief, who was slouched in his chair with a look of mild disdain, the FBI agents' posture was formal but open-minded. They sat with their laptops and notepads, bodies turned to Will to listen properly to what he had to say. Will imagined it was more out of respect for the agent who had recommended him than it was any expectation of Will himself.

"You've already made the connection between the daffodil and Narcissus," Will said, looking from the labelled picture of the flower to the Chief, who scowled at him.

Will raised his eyes and looked somewhere in the middle distance, avoiding eye contact with anyone else.

"The Lotus is significant," he said, "and I think I've found the myth that the killer had in mind when he made his-"

"*Design*?" The Chief interrupted, in a mocking tone.

The Head Agent, a slim lady with pointed features, and even more pointed look of disapproval, shot the Chief a glare and then turned to Will.

"Design? Is that you too, Graham?"

Will nodded, not sensing any mockery from her.

"Hmm, yes, I think that fits. Someone, write that down. It's not just an MO, is it? It's like this killer thinks he's creating art."

Will nodded a little more enthusiastically.

"Okay, Graham. You've got my attention. What does the flower represent?"

Will took a deep breath.

"The Lotus Eaters," he explained, "In Greek mythology, they're people who sit under a lotus tree eating the flowers and becoming too lazy- or apathetic – to do anything else."

The Director clicked her fingers at the agent sat closest to her, who then began typing furiously into his laptop.

"In The Odyssey," Will added, "Odysseus's men consume it and refuse to get back on the ship."

"Huh," the burly agent, who had brought him in, huffed and it was with an appreciative tone that made Will stand a little taller.

Will was asked to stay in-room after that, though his opinion wasn't sought again. It hardly mattered. He could feel his chest swell with purpose just being asked to listen in and take notes. Will worked hours past his shift and stayed even after the chief had gone home.

When he did finally return to his miserable apartment block, with the wailing baby and barking of unpermitted dogs, it wasn't far from sunrise. He collapsed, fully dressed, onto his bed and slept for a few hours above the covers before being shocked awake by his alarm.

If he had remembered that he was expected at Hannibal's for dinner that evening, he might have showered and changed. It wasn't until he arrived at the station and was ushered back into the chief's office that he recalled he had plans and by that point it was far too late.

-

Will dragged his hands over his face miserably as he climbed from the taxi and confronted Hannibal's building, all dressed in jasmine for the occasion. He glanced down at his crumpled, two-day old uniform and groaned. The question on everyone's mind all day had been *what is the killer doing with the organs* and they were no closer to figuring that out when Will left the station, realising he'd only be able to reach Hannibal's home in time if he went straight from work.

The door opened as he approached it and Hannibal appeared, in a crisp white dress shirt and apron. He appraised Will's state of dress and seemed…quietly pleased?

"Your killer has been taking up a lot of your time, I see." He said, as he stepped aside to let Will in.

"And that brings you great amusement," Will surmised, in a biting tone "I'm sure seeing me like this only serves to confirm your first impression of me."

"Which was?" Hannibal asked, placidly.

"Poor white trash child," Will sighed glumly, "and all the poor personal hygiene and presentation that comes with that label."

There was a long pause as the door clicked shut quietly. Hannibal considered Will for a long time with that eerie, blank look that made his skin itch.

"My first impression of you was that you were a highly skilled, if rude, mechanic," Hannibal said plainly.

Will laughed and felt his face heat.

"Well, you were half right," he allowed. "I'm sorry. I've barely slept, and I'm not sociable when I'm well rested so…"

He trailed off and looked at his feet.

"Thanks for inviting me," he mumbled, after a moment.

"Even though you did not want to come," Hannibal said with a nod and a small smile.

"That didn't seem to dissuade you."

“I care for what I think you need, not what I think you want.” Hannibal explained, as he walked past Will to the kitchen, “and right now I believe you’re in need of a *hearty* meal.”

He eyes glinted with humour as he approached the island where an array of vegetables lay half-prepared. He motioned for Will to take a seat across from him and poured him a glass of wine.

“I read about the body,” Hannibal said without preamble. “I assumed straight away that you had been hard at work since yesterday morning.”

He looked up from dicing an onion and Will quickly ducked his head to watch Hannibal’s hands instead.

“You don’t look as dejected as usual,” he observed, placing the knife down so that Will had nothing to watch to avoid eye contact.

He looked back up reluctantly and felt pinned in place.

“It’s been an unusually fulfilling couple of days,” Will murmured, taking a gulp of wine that probably ought to be sipped.

“Oh?”

“The FBI are involved now and they…*listen* to me.”

Hannibal said nothing, only smiled a small smile and went back to dicing the onion with ease. He seemed content for Will to watch him in silence. It really was a performance – the flick of his wrist as he tossed the contents of a frying pan into the air and the expert way he caught it all, the hiss of naked flames searing the meat and the silver blur of his knife slicing through even the toughest root vegetables like butter. Will had almost forgotten he was meant to be company at all when Hannibal’s voice broke the spell.

“This is almost done. If you take your seat at the table, I’ll plate and present momentarily.”

Will blinked himself back into the present and nodded mutely. At some point he had finished his entire glass of wine, and the warmth of the kitchen had made him drowsy. He regained his composure at the table, just in time for Hannibal to enter and place his plate before him with the flourish he had come to expect.

“Braised lamb heart,” he announced, “stuffed with chestnut mushrooms, onion and parsley.”

Will couldn’t help the undignified laugh that escaped him then. Hannibal raised a brow and waited for him to explain.

“Heart,” Will said, “That was the organ missing from the body.”

Hannibal tilted his head slightly, watched Will laugh, and then raised his hands with a smile.

“You’ve caught me,” He said, eyes crinkled.

Will's laugh stuttered into a sigh as he watched Hannibal refill his glass.

"If only it were that easy," he lamented. "Wow, this looks amazing."

The heart was thinly sliced, drizzled in red sauce, and neatly garnished with peppered, wilted greens.

Hannibal dipped his head in acknowledgement.

"The secret," he said, with a dramatic pause, "is to let the heart rest overnight after braising."

He took his seat at the head of the table and his hand brushed Will's as he picked up his fork.

Will cleared his throat.

"If I ever cook heart, I will keep that in mind," He said, taking a bite and feeling his face crumble in appreciation.

"Oh," he breathed.

"Thank you, Will."

They ate quietly for a few minutes and Will began to feel at ease despite himself. The candles nestled among Hannibal's ornate centrepiece flickered quietly and cast the room in a warm glow.

"If it's not too morbid for the dinner table," Hannibal began, looking abashed, "might I ask why the killer took the heart?"

Will shrugged, unperturbed by the question.

"No idea," he said, resting his fork for a moment, "though if human heart tastes as good as-"

He shook his head, stopping himself.

"I'm sorry, that was in poor taste," he said, suitably mortified.

Hannibal seemed unworried.

"Maybe when braised in red wine," he allowed.

"Hmm, and left to rest overnight," Will added, relieved that his joke had been well received.

Hannibal smiled at him, and Will was certain it reached his eyes.

He looked his age when he smiled like that – almost soft and youthful beneath the angular cut of his cheekbones and jaw. Will was only aware that his eyes had travelled to Hannibal's lips when his mouth opened and closed slowly around a forkful of food. He blinked and looked back down at his plate, a little mournful to find it almost empty.

“Is there dessert?” He asked, before realising how presumptuous that sounded and cringing accordingly.

“There can be,” Hannibal sounded amused. “Though that would require you to be in my presence even longer than necessary.”

“Is that something that you would be-“ Will hesitated, biting his lip nervously, “-*amenable* to?”

Hannibal swallowed the last bite of his food and placed his cutlery down neatly. Will watched his throat bob.

“Your success at work has imbued you with confidence,” Hannibal said, “It suits you.”

“Is that a yes?” Will asked, trying not to fidget in his seat.

Hannibal looked at him, deeply and for an uncomfortably long time. Will felt himself blush.

“Wait for me in the study, Will.” Hannibal said, voice suddenly low – and the authoritative tone didn’t aggravate Will as it had before. “I’ll be in shortly.”

Chapter 9

As the minutes stretched on, Will began to regret his bold request for dessert. He felt a frantic sort of panic as he imagined that he'd been misinterpreted and that Hannibal would suddenly fill the doorway, naked, and present *dessert*. It was only Will's certainty that he was undesirable - due to his drawn and bedraggled appearance, low social class and abrasive personality – that stopped him fleeing. He was unsure when, or indeed why, that realisation had dawned on him but that didn't stop it from punching some of the air out of him. Inferiority was unpleasant, but he had no desire to be *compatible* with Hannibal – at least not in that sense.

As if to taunt him, the near-forgotten fantasy of Hannibal on his knees resurfaced in Will's mind and he lurched up from his seat and began to pace the length of the room like a caged animal. People thought of all sorts of unexpected things when grasping desperately for release. Hannibal had pleasing features, in a discordant sort of way. Will wouldn't try to deny it – had no reason to. He was like a peacock; dignified and incandescent, but not approachable or endearing. Acknowledgment of that fact did not mean that Will was attracted to him. In fact, Will was constantly put-off by Hannibal. He had forced his way into Will's safe space so it only followed that he would make room for himself in Will's mind as well. Not that *that* had ever been a particularly safe space. With a sigh Will reclaimed his seat and tried not to fidget.

When Hannibal did finally emerge, he was fully dressed and holding a small dish in each hand. He set them down on the ornate side table beside Will.

"Whisky and chocolate cremeux," he announced, "and, if you give me one moment, two fingers of single malt to match."

Will watched him pour two snifters and wondered if it was a good idea to follow wine with whisky. He didn't question Hannibal though and took a sip as soon as the glass was in his hand.

"This is-" Will paused, looking for the correct way to describe the delicately crafted cups of dark chocolate, filled with golden icecream and sprinkled with cocoa, "*art.*"

"Thank you, Will," Hannibal said, taking the seat on the other side of the table. "I'll admit, chocolate anglaise provides a rather challenging medium."

"How do you find time to hone your culinary skills to this extent," Will asked between heavenly mouthfuls of dessert, "*and* attend medical school?"

Hannibal watched while Will took another bite before answering.

"The two are not so different. They both rely heavily on one's fine motor skills."

Will hummed thoughtfully.

“And your sculpting too, I assume?”

Hannibal’s lip twitched up at the corner and he dipped his head.

“*Especially* the sculpting,” he said.

The study was dimly lit, cast in shadows like the rest of the apartment, until Hannibal stood to light the fire before them. It crackled to life and, rather than chasing the shadows away, set them to dancing all around them.

“This is cosy,” Will said, in the flat voice he often used when distinctly uneasy.

Hannibal turned to him and smiled with the flames at his back.

“I’m glad you’re beginning to feel more comfortable in my presence.”

Like so often before in their short acquaintance, Will was unable to decipher if he was being genuine or sardonic. He had such a *flat* presence – like someone two dimensional, not yet fully formed. Will had a way of peering around the edges of the façades that others used to mask who they were on the inside. With Hannibal, Will peered and found nothing. There was the façade, certainly, but no truth to uncover underneath. It meant that Hannibal’s company was uniquely unsettling all while offering Will a long sought-after reprieve from *seeing*.

“I find you hard to read,” he muttered, quite suddenly.

Will had gotten into trouble throughout his childhood for speaking his mind. He was still learning not to.

“What is it that you find so elusive?” Hannibal asked, sitting across from Will once more.

“Your intentions, for one,” Will bit out, placing his empty plate down beside his equally empty glass and wringing his hands. “Am I here just for you to poke at, or to satisfy your curiosity?”

Hannibal tilted his head.

“My curiosity?”

“The murders,” Will said, waving his hand in a frantic motion that even he couldn’t decipher the meaning of. “You want an inside scoop into the type of macabre displays that draw *crowds* of people and you’ve decided I’m so lonely that you only need to feed me and offer me a warm bed for the night and I’ll spill all the gory details.”

“It wounds me to discover that you find me so pedestrian,” Hannibal said, refilling Will’s glass, though he only looked quietly amused.

“No, it doesn’t,” Will grumbled.

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Because you hardly value my opinion.”

Hannibal sighed as he placed the bottle down.

“No, Will. Because you have already confessed you find me hard to read and so I can safely assume you are reading me incorrectly. I am not *only* interested in the murders. I am interested in you.”

Will swallowed. His throat clicked.

“You’re incredibly unique and-“

“I’m not,” Will cut in, with a fervent shake of his head and an awkward chuckle. His face felt hot.

Hannibal blinked once, slowly.

“Let me finish,” he said, flatly, and Will closed his mouth and sank down a little in his chair.

“You’re incredibly unique,” Hannibal repeated, “and I would like us to be friends.”

Will hadn’t known that he harboured any hope of anything more, but – if the way his stomach sank, and his chest constricted was anything to go by – it just so happened that he did.

“Friends,” he said, aiming for nonchalance, “I don’t find you that interesting.”

Hannibal looked blankly at him for several long seconds then moved so suddenly that Will nearly flinched.

“Perhaps you will,” Hannibal said, taking a seat in the armchair besides Will’s “after a few more drinks.”

~

The study was small and the fireplace was not. Flushed from the flames and the drink, Will made his way tipsily to the balcony to get some air. He half expected Hannibal to follow, but he remained in the study. The jasmine spiralled prettily up along the wrought iron swirls of the banister that Will rested his glass upon. Hannibal had refilled it countless times, and Will was vaguely relieved that he didn’t have work the next morning. The sting of Hannibal’s rejection was gone and Will had begun to wonder if it was ever really there to begin with. Earlier that evening, he had felt the stab of unrequited feelings with startling certainty and yet moments before that, he had been equally certain that he did not view Hannibal in a romantic light. As pathetic as it made him feel to admit it, he knew he had to acknowledge the possibility that he had simply become confused because he had no other positive, platonic relationships to compare this to.

“Will?” He heard Hannibal call, “I have something that might be useful.”

Hannibal’s sleeves were rolled up when Will returned, and the top button of his shirt was undone. He slid a book from one of the many shelves and set it carefully on the floor so that

he and Will would be able to look at it together. Will sank down next to him and examined the cover by firelight.

“Demeter and Persephone,” he read, tracing his fingers over the swirling script.

“I thought,” Hannibal began, reaching across Will to open it and in doing so brushing Will’s hand with his own, “that the God of nature and her daughter might offer some insight.”

“This is a beautiful book,” Will murmured, leaning closer to properly take in a tragic but stunning painting of Persephone trapped in the underworld. “What’s the story here?” he asked, pointing out a separate illustration of a daffodil.

Hannibal pulled himself closer to look, so that their bodies were touching from their shoulders to their hips. Will would have normally recoiled, but alcohol numbed his senses and made the touch seem distant and gentle.

“This is exactly what I wanted to show you,” Hannibal said, “when I saw the pictures from the first crime scene online, the daffodil stood out to me but I didn’t know why. As soon as I saw you diligently making your way through a mountain of literature on mythology I was reminded.”

Will could see Hannibal watching him from his periphery, but he was too focussed on scanning the text to return his gaze.

“Hades used a daffodil to trap Persephone in the underworld,” he breathed.

“In one version, yes. She plucked it and the earth opened up where it had been.”

“I don’t think that’s what the killer intended the daffodil to represent,” Will said, shaking his head and turning the page.

Hannibal was very still beside him.

“I’ll get you another drink,” He announced flatly, and stood to do so.

“Sorry,” Will reached up to accept the glass when Hannibal returned. “I didn’t mean to be so blunt. This could still be really helpful.”

When Hannibal sat, it was not beside Will but on the chair above him. He leaned down to look over his shoulder at the book and asked.

“What flowers were used this time?”

Will blinked and looked up at him questioningly.

“How do you know so much?” He asked.

“I saw flowers in the photographs of the most recent crime scene, but the FBI were very good at obscuring much of it from the photographers’ view. I couldn’t make out what they were.”

Will nodded and returned to the book, taking another large swig of whiskey.

“Lotus flowers,” he said.

Hannibal hummed from above him and Will felt his hot breath on his neck. It suddenly dawned on him that he was essentially sat at Hannibal feet. He considered standing, but then Hannibal’s hand was on his shoulder.

“The first Lotus was a Naiad-Nymph.” Hannibal murmured thoughtfully, bent to see the book over Will’s shoulder in such a way that he was practically whispering into Will’s ear. “Persephone spent time with Naiad-Nymphs in some renditions of the time leading up to Hade’s abduction of her.”

“Oh,” Will sighed, feeling ignorant for having dismissed Hannibal so quickly and mortified for having felt so self-assured only moment before.

He ducked his head and was all the more humiliated when he felt the hand on his shoulder squeeze gently.

“So, I could be wrong.” Will sighed, turning the page to learn more.

He pictured the gratified sneers of the Chief and his colleagues and shuddered. They were already a pack of manic and mottled hyenas at his back – cackling and waiting for him to stumble. If he did, especially now that he’d made a spectacle of himself by garnering the attention of the FBI, they would lunge and there would be nothing left of him.

“I can’t be wrong,” he intoned desperately, craning his head back to look up at Hannibal.

He was sat stoically above him and Will was at least grateful that *he* had not started to gloat.

“Perhaps you’re not,” he murmured dismissively, withdrawing his hand, but the seed of doubt had already been planted. “It’s late,” he added.

“Oh,” Will said dully, before stumbling awkwardly to his feet. “Oh. I’ve outstayed my welcome.”

The confidence he had gained since finally being taken seriously had depleted from a scorching furnace to a pile of ash.

“Not at all,” Hannibal assured him, still sitting comfortably – his legs spread around the spot that Will had vacated. “Only, I had a long day. There’s nothing like ten hours at the hospital to make one appreciate the folding seats and buzzing projectors of the lecture hall.”

Will nodded numbly, not really listening. He rubbed his eyes and found daffodils and lotus flowers burnt onto the back of his eyelids.

“I’ll call a cab.”

Hannibal stood, shaking his head, and held Will’s upper arms firmly in both hands.

“Stay,” his fingers pressed in, “I can tell you’re upset.”

Will couldn’t keep the scoff from escaping. He tried to make himself smaller, to shrink out of Hannibal’s reach, but it wasn’t possible.

“That’s not your problem.”

Hannibal exhaled through his nose and offered Will an affected smile that landed a little too close to pitying.

“I’d like it to be. I’d like us to be friends,” he reminded him softly.

Will felt tears threatening to betray him. He blinked quickly but he was sure his eyes looked glassy now.

I could use a friend, he thought.

He stopped trying to slip away from Hannibal and leant into him instead.

“I’ve had too much to drink,” Will muttered, “I can tell, because I can’t feel my lips,” he added, needlessly.

Hannibal leant back to look down at him and brought his thumb to Will’s bottom lip.

“Still there,” he said, with a youthful smirk.

Will’s breath hitched in his throat, and he pulled away in earnest this time.

“Perhaps we’ve both had too much to drink,” Hannibal allowed, after clearing his own throat, and it sounded more like regret than a simple apology.

“I’ll call that cab,” Will said, eyes downcast. He felt suddenly as thought the evening had been nothing more than a long list of tortures – embarrassment, miscommunication, rejection and, to top it all off, *doubt*. That sudden realisation that he might have been wrong all along stung worst of all.

“You won’t,” Hannibal uttered without a trace of doubt. “You’ll stay in my guest room again tonight.”

Will scoffed: “You can’t just-“ He trailed off, brow drawn, shaking his head.

“I’ve upset you,” Hannibal went on, as if Will hadn’t spoke at all, “So you’ll stay tonight and in the morning I’ll undo the damage I’ve caused.”

“You’ve not-“ Will began to reassure, but stopped when he realised that it was indeed Hannibal who had brought his world crashing down around him. “You don’t have to-“ He tried again, but that wasn’t right either. Hannibal didn’t appear as if he felt particularly pressured to do anything he didn’t want to. *I don’t want to stay the night,* Will thought and found that that was equally untrue.

With a sigh he swallowed the remaining shreds of his pride and ducked his head in a single nod.

“I don’t really know how to be a friend,” he admitted.

Hannibal nodded sagely, as if he had assumed as much.

“Then let me guide you,” he said, with a sweeping gesture towards the stairs, and Will – who had never really been comfortable leading his own life – let Hannibal take the reins.

-

The next morning, they returned to their units. It felt strange to arrive there together, when just the thought of Hannibal existing in this space had caused Will no small amount of displeasure only days before. Will stepped from the car first and wondered if he might finally catch a glimpse of Hannibal’s workspace but Hannibal had other plans, and bypassed his own unit entirely to follow Will to his.

“What’s on the agenda today?” He asked.

Will’s brows arched in question.

“You don’t mind getting your hands dirty?” He asked.

Hannibal removed his soft, leather gloves and slipped them into his coat pocket.

“No, I suppose you don’t.” Will reasoned, thinking of scalpels and surgical masks and operating theatres smeared with blood. “I’ve been tinkering with an old boat motor for a while now. I know exactly what needs to be done. Trouble is, I’d need three hands to hold everything in place.

“Then allow me to lend one of my own,” Hannibal said amicably.

Despite his insistence that they had *both* over-imbibed the night before, Hannibal seemed positively peppy while Will’s pulse was pounding in his temples. There weren’t many mornings that he didn’t wake hungover, though, so he was well-versed in getting on with things anyway.

“Do you know anything about mechanics?” Will asked, as Hannibal came to stand beside him.

“Nothing at all,” Hannibal replied, amicably.

Will looked into the black, greasy depths of the gutted motor and then at the crisp, clean cuffs of Hannibal’s sleeves.

“You know, you don’t have to help me. I can manage,” he said, but Hannibal simply shook his head.

“Show me what to do, Will,” he insisted, and rolled up his sleeves.

In the end, that did little to help, and they were both smeared in engine grease far past their elbows by the time they were done.

“I’m sorry,” Will said, grabbing two rags from a shelf and handing Hannibal the cleanest of the two. “I should have warned you.”

Hannibal received the rag with a nod of gratitude and began making quick work of cleaning himself off.

“You needn’t apologise, Will,” he said, “It was a pleasure to see you in your element.”

Something clicked then, and Will felt foolish.

“Oh,” he said.

“Oh?” Hannibal asked, handing the cloth back after having limited success with removing the black streaks from his forearms.

“You did all this to make me feel like less of a failure,” Will realised aloud. “To fix bursting my bubble last night.”

Hannibal began to suavely deny it, but Will held up a hand.

“No, it’s okay.” He said earnestly, “It’s actually kind. I appreciate it.”

And it really was. It was perhaps the only time in Will’s life that someone had made a concerted effort to make him feel better about his own failure, rather than scolding him or mocking him or simply expressing their disappointment.

“I’m a terrible detective, but a serviceable mechanic,” Will laughed, only half-bitterly.

“You’re talented in many fields, Will. Last night, I only meant to offer a wider perspective. As someone on the outside, looking in.” Hannibal ducked his head, “I only meant to be of some help, having had some experience studying mythology in boarding school in my youth.”

Will nodded numbly.

“I appreciate it. Better you show me I’m wrong than someone back at the station. God,” he groaned, “I’ve made a fool of myself in front of the FBI.”

“I may be the one who is mistaken.” Hannibal allowed.

Will shook his head. Hannibal had said it himself. He knew more about this than Will.

He laid a hand on the motor, eager to change the subject.

“Thanks for your help, anyway.” He said. “I’d offer to return the favour, but somehow I don’t think I’d be any good at what you get up to next door.”

Hannibal offered another of those blank, indecipherable, smiles.

“I think you’d surprise yourself,” he said.

End Notes

Take a shot every time Hannibal implies that he's a serial killer.

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